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SPY x FAMILY

FORGED IN ELEGANCE!

Birdie Wing
-Golf Girls' Story-
THE BEST BY PAR!

Skeleton Knight
in Another World
TO THE BONE!

Ascendance of
a Bookworm
A PAGE OF LIFE!

Tiger & Bunny 2
WE CAN BE HEROES!

ANIME REVIEWS

SAYONARA ZETSUBOU-SENSEI, PACIFIC RIM: THE BLACK,
AHAREN-SAN WA HAKARENAI YA BOY KONGMING!,
SHORT PEACE, HUMANITY HAS DECLINED

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DIRECT FROM JAPAN

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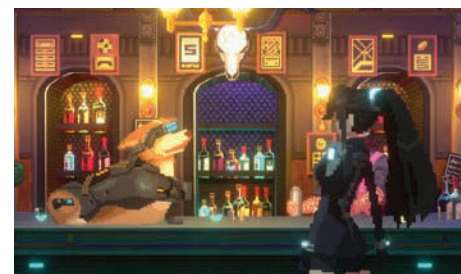
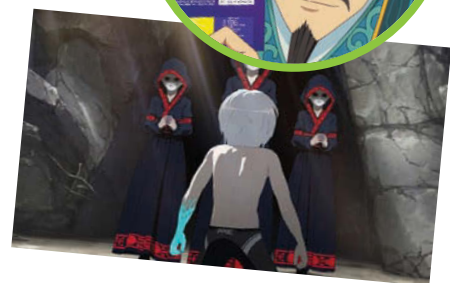
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SPY x FAMILY

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SKELETON KNIGHT

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editorial

Podcasting with Pure TokyoScope!

Hey, this is Patrick and hey, welcome to the new issue of Otaku USA magazine!

Now in our 16th year of publication (!!!) we once again proudly present an array of anime, manga, cosplay, games, and other fun stuff from Japan to the delight of readers like yourself. If you're a new person around these parts, welcome to our world! If you're a regular reader, then welcome back to our pages!

So what do we have in store for you this time? Well ... *SPYxFAMILY* figures heavily in our thoughts as writer Daryl Surat gives us his two cents on this recent smash hit anime series. Up next, Michael Goldstein guides us to "another world" with a feature on *Ascendence of a*

Bookworm which is now in it's third season. Then, Kara Dennison has an isekai show up her own sleeve to review with a look at *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. And finally Daryl returns with a tag-team pair of features on *Tiger & Bunny 2* and *BIRDIE WING -Golf Girls' Story-*.

In between these features, you'll find our usual departments and assorted goodies including anime reviews, manga reviews, manga samples, game review, cosplay pics, and even a cameo from invading alien Neptune men! Whew!

So what else is going on? Well ... right now as I sit writing this, it is early June in Tokyo. I think this must be the raining season because I sure have been using an umbrella a lot whenever I go outside. Once things dry up, Japan is bound to get hot and humid as is the way of summer around these parts.

I've been keeping myself busy with a couple of new projects including a collaboration with a Japanese anime professional and *maybe even* a new book to write (more details about both soon ... don't want to jinx 'em!). In the meantime, I've just begun podcast with my friend Matt Alt called Pure TokyoScope! Matt has contributed to our magazine starting in the very beginning with issue 1, and you might know him from his appearances on the NHK World-Japan television series "Japanology Plus" as well as his book "Pure Invention: How Japan Made the Modern World." Matt and I have been friends (and sometimes podcasters) for years, but now that we both reside in Japan, we've decided that it's finally time to combine our powers Voltron-style and go all out with a free weekly podcast available to everyone.

On the very first episode of the Pure TokyoScope podcast, Matt and I reacted to a Hollywood Reporter article on "How Japanese Anime Became the World's Most Bankable Genre" and reviewed the new film *Shin Ultraman*, produced by Hideaki Anno of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* fame. Future episodes of the Pure TokyoScope podcast will also include interviews segments, location reports, and live events from Japan!

The Pure TokyoScope podcast is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and other platforms. Or you can listen direct at www.anchor.fm/PureTokyoScope!

That's it for the shameless plug! Please enjoy the new issue of *Otaku USA* magazine!

—Patrick



The Half-Demon Princesses take on Kirinmaru!



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LETTERS/TEGAMI

Hi Otaku USA! My name is Brooke, I've been cosplaying since 2019! This is my Rinoa Heartilly cosplay from *Final Fantasy VIII*, and my Fiona Cosplay from *Borderlands*. I've been a huge fan of Otaku USA for a long time. It would be an honor to be featured!

Hi Brooke! Thanks for your letter and for your pics! Although we also have a dedicated cosplay section, we can always try to squeeze in a few more cool cosplays photos here in the Letters section if space permits! Thanks again for picking up our magazine! The honor is OURS!



Hello Otaku USA! Just recently, I watched all 12 episodes of the magical/psychological thriller *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, and all I can say is: WOW! I haven't watched the 2 movies I also got (I think there is also a third) but I must say I'm addicted!

In a previous issue I mentioned how Isekai series are hugely popular right now and when I think about it Magical Girl series are up there too. Had this series been covered here before? Are there more of these projects (or similar

Moon with young girls as its target audience (I have 2 girl cousins who were WAAAY into that series when they were younger and even got me hooked) but it can be enjoyed by both boys and girls, young and old.

That's the "Magic" of anime. Stay awesome guys!

-Jason Todd

Hi Jason! Thanks for your letter and thanks for sharing your enthusiasm for *Puella Magi*

April 2017 issue. Worth picking up if you're curious about how this character has been depicted in other media. As for the Magical Girl genre, we figure why not take things all the way back to one of the first ones with Sally the Witch from 1966? Also, PS, there are indeed 3 *Madoka Magica* movies! Count 'em, 3!

Dear Otaku USA, I really enjoyed reading your review of *Burn the Witch* in your Feb 22 issue and wondered if you plan on any more reviews or features on *Bleach* related stuff.

Che Gilson's review was fair and reminded me of most of the best bits of the manga, and who could forget the anime version.

I can't wait for the anime to return in October of this year as it's been so long since *Bleach* originally finished and I found this review a signal that it's come-back is worthwhile. Thanks so much!

-Sandra

Hi Sandra! Thanks for your letter and for your kind words. Have you ever been tested for psychic powers? I ask because we indeed have some very big plans for *Bleach* coverage very soon in our magazine! I don't want to spoil the surprise too much, but you might want to keep your eyes peeled for our next issue. In the meantime, now's as good a time as any for more *Bleach* in our pages! Enjoy the pic!

And there you have it ... more lucky letters rescued from the mail sack. Now give us more! Please send your questions, comments, queries, requests, and assorted ephemera to otakuusa@gmail.com!



projects) available or coming in the near future?

I think one of the great things about anime is it covers such a broad expansion on genres and it has something for everyone. When you think "Magical Girl" you think of series such as *Sailor*

Madoka Magica with us! Looking through our stacks of previous issues, it seems that we haven't actually covered this great anime series so much. The most in-depth we've gone is a review of the *Madoka Magica* manga in our

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with Writer, Katsuyuki Sumisawa

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Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle

Square Enix Unveils \$11,600 Final Fantasy VI Statue

If you're a *Final Fantasy* fan in need of a real wallet-buster of a commemorative item, look no further than the latest addition to the Masterline statue series. Square Enix recently unveiled a new *Final Fantasy VI* statue from



Prime 1 Studio, and the 1/6 scale recreation of Terra riding a suit of Magitek armor comes in at a staggering ¥1,485,000. That adds up to approximately \$11,600!

If that hasn't stopped you in your tracks, the highly detailed statue—which is based on an early concept design by legendary *Final Fantasy* artist Yoshitaka Amano, and is easily the most expensive in the Masterline series thus far—is set to ship in Japan on July 28, 2023.



© Square Enix



1/4 Scale Cardcaptor Sakura Figure is Gorgeous, Expensive

Those looking to show their love for the *Cardcaptor Sakura* series, you can't do so much more effectively than the latest figure from FuRyu and Yoshitoku. Pre-orders just went live for a 1/4 scale Sakura Kinomoto figure, complete with handmade kimono cloth and a design inspired by the May 2020 cover of shoujo manga magazine *Nakayoshi*.

Developed in collaboration with FuRyu's F:NEX brand of hobby goods, the 25th anniversary *Cardcaptor Sakura* figure doesn't come cheap. If you want to get your hands on this one it will cost you ¥168,300, which adds up to about \$1,285. FuRyu is basing production on demand, so they will only make as many figures as are ordered. Figures are currently set to ship in February 2023, but unfortunately F:NEX doesn't offer overseas delivery options.



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Jordan Brand Shows Off Naruto Collaboration

One of the big surprises of the year arrived when two iconic tastes came together in the Jordan Brand x Naruto collaboration. Following a teaser on the official Jordan Brand social accounts back in April, the results were revealed as *Naruto Shippuden*-themed Jordan Zion 1 sneakers, endorsed by New Orleans Power Forward Zion Williamson. *Naruto* creator Masashi Kishimoto even presented Williamson with a custom illustration depicting the basketball star in the style of the manga!

Three distinct pairs of sneakers are at the heart of the collection, with each retailing for \$130 (if you can still find them!). The styles are based on *Naruto* in his Six Paths Sage form, Six Paths Madara Uchiha and *Naruto* in his Nine-Tailed Demon Fox Four Tails form. If you managed to snag a pair of any of these, color us jealous!



© Jordan Brand © 2002 MASASHI KISHIMOTO / 2007 SHIPPUDEN

Know When It's Time to Cry with CLANNAD Watch

Based on the visual novel developed by KEY, the *CLANNAD* anime recently revealed a new collaboration with the SuperGroupies brand. Following the concept of animation in fashion, the latest products include Nagisa Furukawa themed watches, bags and wallets, with the final products set to be delivered later this year.

The bag is priced at ¥15,400 (about US\$119) and the wallet is ¥13,200 (\$102), but the big ticket item is the watch. Securing that one will run *CLANNAD* fans a cool ¥33,000, which adds up to about \$254. The watch and its case are both pretty stylish, though, so if you have cash to spare this might just be the perfect way for the hardcore Nagisa stans out there to tell the time.



© KEY



Universal Soldiers

Fans of Japanese mecha have a new way to celebrate their love of *Mobile Suit Gundam* with a new line of figures from Tamashii Nations. Aimed at fans all over the world, the Gundam Universe line is an inspiring combination of stylish sculpting and dynamic possibility in a standard 6" action figure size.

New additions include the RX-78GP01-Fb Gundam Full Burner, as seen in the classic *Mobile Suit Gundam 0083 STARDUST MEMORY OVA* series. There's also the *The GN-0000+GNR-010 00 Raiser* from *Mobile Suit Gundam 00* and even a *OZ-06MS Leo* from *Mobile Suit Gundam W*!

All three figures feature the hallmarks of the Gundam Universe line including kinetic styling, durable construction, and detail packed sculpts!

The three mobile suits we've mentioned are slated to strike by the end of summer 2022, so prepare for combat! In the meantime, for more details, be sure to check out www.tamashiiinations.com/gundam_universe!



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Sayonara, Zetsubou-sensei: Season 1

Excessive sensory overload



STUDIO/COMPANY
Nozomi Entertainment
RATING
TV-14

Rejoice, what remains of extremely online U.S. otaku fandom from the late 2000s! The defining anime of a sub-generation is finally officially available in English with a release so high

in quality you can ditch your old digital fansubs. That's right; get ready to keep the Pause button at the ready once more because 12 years and one licensor change later, *Sayonara, Zetsubou-sensei* ("Goodbye, Mr. Despair") is now on Blu-Ray in North America.

Perhaps it's for the best that *SZS* skipped the 2010s, as there was a seismic shift in Internet culture (and with it, anime fandom) that's occurred since then, and I'm not

high-school students (predominantly female and totally into him) each have some sort of similarly serious dysfunction played for laughs in service of [insert reason here]. The most notable of which is Kafuka, who as an eternal optimist is Nozomu's polar opposite.

That's not what makes *Sayonara, Zetsubou-sensei* so rooted to its time, though. It's the presentation. For this is a style of anime humor that has largely ceased to be: the excessive sensory overload approach so commonly used in

ily Guy is funny, with the difference being that you have to be an otaku—my mistake, "you have to truly understand Japanese culture"—to pick up what's being thrown down.

Well, it's that or read the liner notes. For while there may be no English dub due to so much of the scripts relying on grammar/linguistics, *Sayonara, Zetsubou-sensei* has got to be one of the greatest English anime translation accomplishments of all time. Not only were the original scripts lost, meaning the complete series had to be translated by



visual style. Combine the rapid-fire pacing and the "edgy" content (which includes a fair bit of female nudity/bondage/etc. of the cartoon high school girl variety) with an avant-garde usage of off-kilter camera angles, shadow and silhouette, sharp contrasts, plus other tricks pioneered by the anime greats of the 1970s and you see on display the stylistic zenith (dare I say) of now-otaku darling animation studio Shaft and its head honcho Akiyuki Shinbo...and yes, that is the Romanization which Nozomi Entertainment uses, so don't complain to ME if you insist it should be "Simbo."

Nozomi Entertainment has committed to releasing the other two seasons as well as the OVAs. Granted, that isn't the entire story, but considering the direction which



sure how much of "late 2000s alternative/edgy anime comedy" is acceptable in this day and age. If my beloved *Detroit Metal City* and this are anything to go by, it's probably "none whatsoever." The very premise of *SZS* is one colossal "content warning" tag: eternally pessimistic homeroom teacher Nozomu is constantly trying and failing to commit suicide due to having lost all hope in [insert reason here], and all of his

wacky Japanese TV commercials. There is constant talking. Walls of background text that only display for a split second due to the frequent Michael Bay-like camera cuts require viewers to not only pause, but also decipher the reference. Because everything is either a direct reference or a pun ABOUT a reference, and the joke more or less is that "a reference is being made." This is funny the way that say, *Fam-*

ear, but researching every reference has resulted in the inclusion of a full-color, 329-page scene-for-scene sequential breakdown of every single reference made across the 12 episodes that comprise Season 1. No more walls of on-screen fansubber explanations! That's one fewer text onslaught at least.

If you don't consider just references funny, there is a third critical portion of *SZS*'s success: its

the manga took beyond where they stopped adapting to anime 12 years ago and the fact that studio Shaft has since gone on to make mega-hit *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (the third theatrical film of which is forthcoming), I'm going with "there will not be any further *Sayonara, Zetsubou-sensei* anime made." But that's okay. It's nothing to kill yourself over, because we still got these.

—Daryl Surat

Aharen-san wa Hakarenai

Invariably reassessing this dream



STUDIO/COMPANY

Crunchyroll

RATING

Not Rated

We all know the old saying: “It’s always the quiet ones.” What “it” entails is situational, but almost always amounts to some variety of unexpected weirdness. Very tall schoolboy Raido gets confirmation of the adage when he decides to befriend Rena Aharen, his small and soft-spoken classmate. Little did he know that, once he established that interest,

Aharen, for her part, is genuinely as unfathomable as the title makes her out to be. She has a surprising aptitude for some things, like Reversi and claw games, while being completely inept at swimming and basketball. She’ll join herself to you at the hip if you give her a chance, but certain social encounters exhaust her so much, she has to ride the family dog home. She goes along with Raido’s misguided schemes without question, even when the words that come out of



there was no going back.

Aharen-san wa Hakarenai (lit. “Aharen-san is unfathomable”) is the latest in the growing subgenre of “My classmate is super cute with an odd but endearing social trait.” Initially, the title of the series is quite literal—not only does Aharen give Raido the cold shoulder, he can’t even hear her when she speaks. But as he pushes to get to know her, she comes out of her shell quickly. *Extremely* quickly.

You see, Aharen’s standoffishness isn’t disinterest. Quite the opposite. She’s never sure how close it’s okay to get, and ends up becoming clingy. After being taunted by classmates for this behavior, she backed off. But Raido’s concerted efforts reassure her that this is a friendship, and before long the two are walking home arm in arm.

The relationship between Aharen and Raido is simultaneously strange and sweet. Raido is our audience association character, and we see the world (and Aharen) through his eyes almost without exception. His feelings about her range from fiercely competitive to fiercely devoted, sometimes within the space of a few minutes. One moment he’s determined to beat her at ping pong; the next, he’s fantasizing about them rocketing up the ranks of sports stardom. (And the *next* minute, he’s invariably reassessing this dream as they both get trounced easily.)

his mouth make it clear that he’s making a lot of weird assumptions.

While *Aharen-san wa Hakarenai* is largely a two-hander, there are a few cast members to fill things out. There’s Mitsuki Oshiro, Aharen’s protective childhood friend. She’s even taller than Raido, and convinced he’s unsafe to be around, but their rivalry is surprisingly laid-back. If anything, Mitsuki appears to be more scared of Aharen and her judgment. Ms. Tobaru is a chivalry-obsessed classic lit teacher whose heart nearly explodes every time she sees Raido helping Aharen. Young Futaba considers herself Aharen’s rival after a playground Reversi fight. And each of the two protagonists has younger siblings — both much more expressive than their big brother and sister.

The real appeal of the series, of course, is the relationship of the main duo. Both of them are kind of a mess, but in an understandable, teenage way. Raido dreams of greatness in fits and starts, generally with little to no good information. Aharen enjoys his company and has no sense of personal space, often sitting on his lap



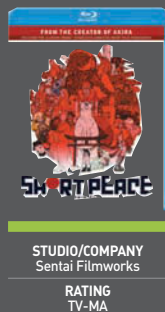
or shoving food from her lunch against his face until he eats it. Both of them are hugely unexpressive while also being deeply emotionally invested in things. Most of all, in some weird way, they appear to understand each other in a way no one else can.

Aharen-san wa Hakarenai is unrelentingly adorable, even in its moments of bitter rivalry and secondhand embarrassment. Its stars are uncommonly weird, but never to a degree that you can’t see yourself in them somewhat. Every anime season needs at least one show that will make you feel good without fail, and this most certainly fits the bill.

—Kara Dennison

Short Peace

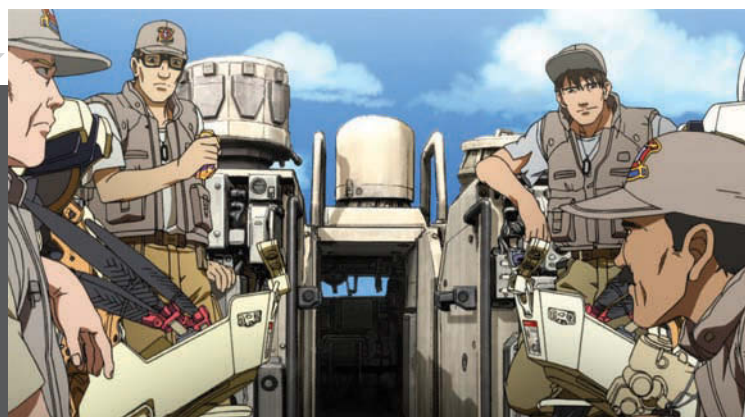
Absolutely fantastic pedigrees



When visionary directors come together to create unique short films, there's almost always a dud to be found within the bunch. When it comes to Sunrise and Shochiku's *Short Peace*, a four-film multimedia project (complete with an accompanying game), it's hard to believe, but the entirety of the film's four animated shorts are unique, must-watch tales with superb animation, often heartrending stories, and arresting visuals. From the unique beauty of the first entry, "Possessions," directed by Shuhei Morita to the visceral *Gambo*, directed by Hiroaki Ando, *Short Peace* has a memorable set of narratives that anyone can enjoy, with bite-sized shorts that feel as though they've told tales that last for centuries.

The collection opens with a sequence by Koji Morimoto that follows a young girl chasing a white rabbit through different, magical worlds, much like the classic tale of *Alice in Wonderland*. After she disappears into a new land, "Possessions" begins, and we see a lone traveler caught in a storm. He happens upon an abandoned shrine, where inside he finds a small altar and a few offerings, then dozes off to sleep. When he awakes, he finds that he's been transported to a new room surrounded by sliding screens. From there, he's accosted by the spirits of worn umbrellas, kimono fabric, and more. The traveler has been carrying a portable cabinet the entire time with a variety of tools he uses to quickly repair the items for the spirits within. It's an exhilarating CG tale that works well within the medium, with a surprising climax that'll stick with you long after the short ends.

"Combustible" is Katsuhiro Otomo's contribution, set in the Edo period. It's a sharp departure from

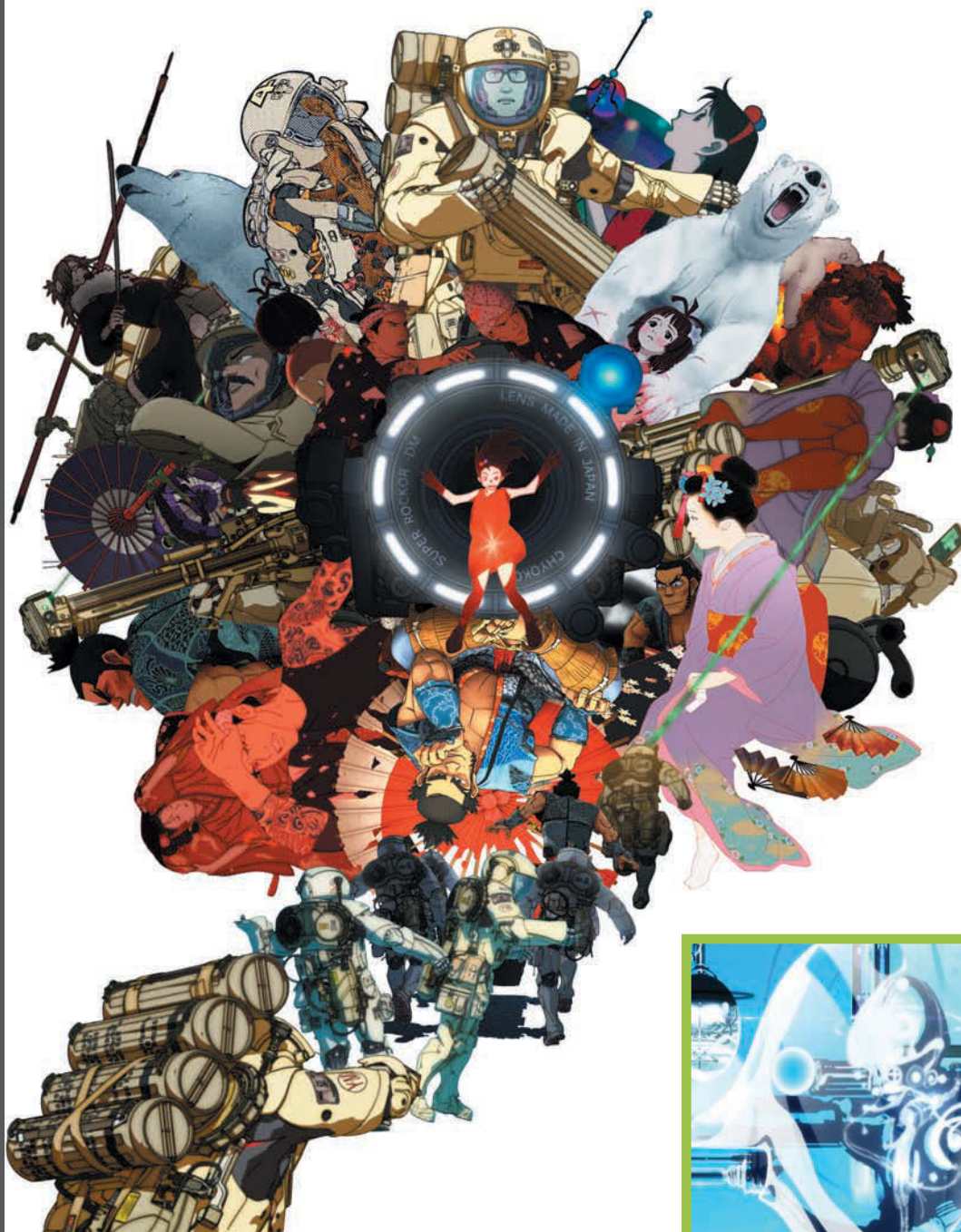


the detailed CG seen in "Possessions" as well as in terms of tone and storytelling. It centers on a young woman named Owaka, who's engaged to be married. She's in love with her childhood friend, however, and one night, while she's looking over her wedding gifts, inadvertently starts a fire that spreads throughout the entire neighborhood. In a heartbreaking

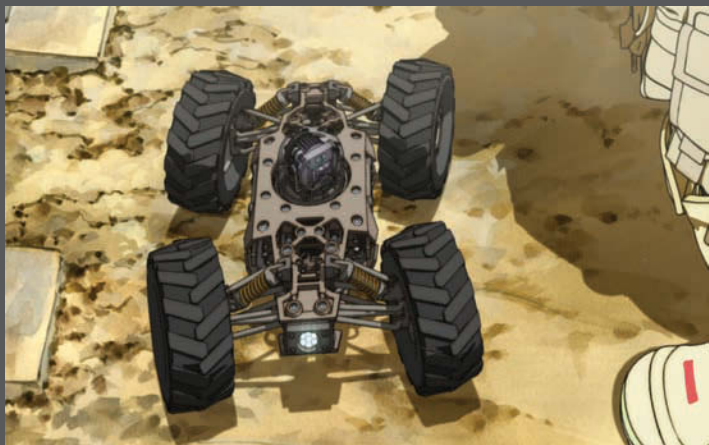
conclusion, the love of her life attempts to save her, but nothing works out as well as planned. This is undoubtedly the highlight of the entire set of shorts, and will no doubt resonate with fans of Otomo's other work.

"*Gambo*" is an unexpected combination of sci-fi, religion, and violence from director Hiroaki Ando. An injured Christian samurai finds





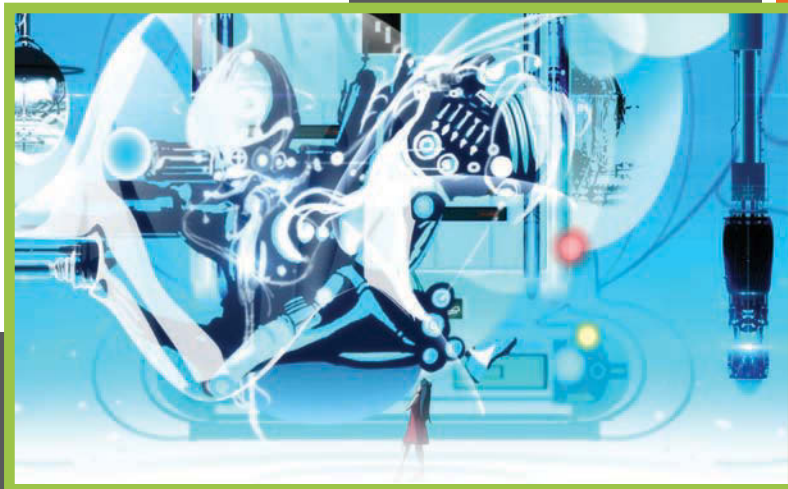
© Short Peace Committee



ogre. In the forest, the village emperor's daughter encounters Gambo, who can understand her thoughts. Gambo ends up fighting with the demon in tandem with the samurai, as the pair work to finally defeat the ogre once and for all. While parts of this story can be convoluted, it's a visual spectacle that's undoubtedly the most adult and violent tale of the four, touching on a variety of themes that will keep you on the edge of your seat.

Finally, "A Farewell to Weapons," while intricate with ridiculously detailed animation, is nowhere near in the same league as the prior three films. Directed by Hajime Katoki and based on the manga written by Katsuhiro Otomo in 1981, it's about a ragtag group of soldiers in power suits who have been dispatched to defeat an automatic sentry. It's nowhere near as poignant or as powerful as the other three films, but it's still an intriguing entry that's worth watching, even if it does make for a bit of a disappointing end to an otherwise strong collection of short films.

Overall, *Short Peace* is an excellent selection of short films that, thematically, work well together. It's full of thoughtful storytelling, beautiful animation, and work from



a white bear named Gambo, but the pair don't get into a tussle. Gambo exits their encounter and runs into a strange red Japanese ogre in a nearby village. The villagers offer a young girl to the ogre every night, but enough is enough. In an effort to change things up, the village chief asks the samurai to hunt and kill the

directors who have absolutely fantastic pedigrees. If you want to watch something a little different that strays from the traditional anime beaten path, *Short Peace* is an intriguing miniature home film festival that's worth grabbing the popcorn and losing yourself in—especially if you're an *Akira* fan.

—Brittany Vincent

Pacific Rim: The Black Season Two

Worshipping the Kaiju

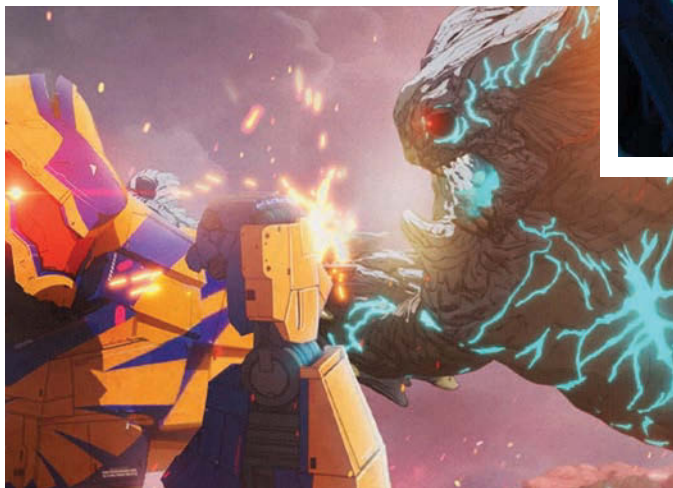


STUDIO/COMPANY
Netflix

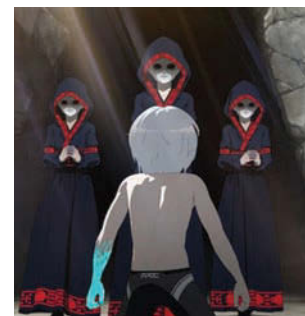
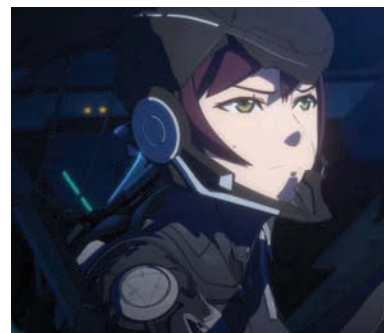
RATING
TV-14

Picking up moments after the conclusion to the first season, the second season of *Pacific Rim: The Black* posits a world where the continent of Australia has fallen to an invasion of “Kaiju:” giant monsters genetically engineered by the Precursors, an alien species intent on terraforming and colonizing Earth. Humanity’s only defense against the Kaiju comes in the form of

“Jaegers:” gigantic humanoid robots that require two pilots connected together in a psychic link known as “the Drift.” Against this backdrop, teenagers Hayley and Taylor Travis attempt to fight their way out of the Australian outback with the aid of an under-equipped, decommissioned training Jaeger known “Atlas Destroyer.” Along the way, they search for their parents, a pair of Jaeger pilots who went missing during a rescue operation years ago. Their journey to Sydney Base, one of the last remaining outposts of civilization on a conquered continent, is com-



plicated by the discovery of Boy, a human/Kaiju hybrid capable of transforming into a giant monster, as well as the intervention of a ruthless group of raiders and the sinister machinations of the Sisters of the Kaiju, a fanatical death-cult devoted to serving the Precursors and worshipping the Kaiju as gods.



Directed by Hiroyuki Hayashi and Jae-Hong Kim and featuring animation production by Polygon Pictures, *Pacific Rim: The Black* is a work of 3DCG animation created as original content for the Netflix streaming service. Like many Netflix original anime, the results are a mixed bag. As in the first season, the animation for the mon-

Humanity Has Declined

A good, old-fashioned sweet



STUDIO/COMPANY
Sentai Filmworks

RATING
TV-14

For an anime series with a title like *Humanity Has Declined*, there’s very little bleak storytelling to be had here. Yes, it’s true in the real world that in many ways these days, humanity seems to have taken a turn for the worse. But that’s not exactly what this series is looking to explore. Instead, it’s a very funny show that’s actually a satire, taking on

some of the most pointed topics possible, with surprising candor.

Humanity Has Declined takes place in a world where declining birth rates have become a fairly ubiquitous issue. As such, there are only a handful of humans left in the world. Instead, fairies have become the dominant species. Humans are still very much important, however, as a young woman (unnamed in the anime, “Watashi” or “Ms. Sweets” in the light novel) acts as a mediator between humans and the fairies. She’s also one of the last humans who can still make sweets and candies, which means the fairies naturally flock to her.

Unfortunately, it’s not as easy as our protagonist would have imagined to take over the business her grandfather had thrived in as the arbitrator between what’s left of the humans and the fairies who have taken over. The series focuses on Watashi’s cynical view of the world and her pointed jokes about culture, business, politics, and the remnants of





sters and giant robots is mostly convincing albeit a bit uncanny. Sometimes these larger-than-life creations don't mesh well with their environments. The character animation is alternatively choppy and stiff, although whether this is a technical issue or an aesthetic choice by the directors remains unclear. In terms of telling a compelling narrative with strong emotional beats, the second season hits more often than it misses. Hayley and Taylor are woefully unprepared to deal with the problems posed by a post-apocalyptic world, and their struggles feel

grounded despite the high-concept nature of the science fiction setting. Some interesting character moments are hopelessly truncated in the name of run time, such as the adventures of the "Bunyip-man", a mad scientist character who tries to co-exist with Kaiju. Others are simply under-developed, such as Mei's missing memories or Shane's inexplicable redemption-from-villainy arc. The second season ties up many previous story threads while introducing new mysteries, but although the series reaches a definitive conclusion in these episodes, the story

feels incomplete. It's as if the creators expected to have more time to explore this world, but no third season is planned, so this finale is the only one *Pacific Rim: The Black* is likely to receive.

Is *Pacific Rim: The Black* worth your time? That depends on how high you set your expectations. The episodes move at a brisk pace that is ideal for binge-viewing, and despite my post-*Pacific Rim: Uprising* cynicism, I found myself drawn into the story and surprised by how much I enjoyed watching it in the moment. Ultimately, though, *Pacific Rim: The Black* is cotton candy entertainment: tasty but insubstantial. Already the events of the series fade from my memory, like the after-effects of a failed Drift, leaving only a jumble of unconnected images behind.

The series introduces intriguing ideas and presents moments of genuine pathos buoyed up by strong performances from the English language cast, but I found the resolution to the story strangely unsatisfying. Something about the experience feels arbitrary and rushed. There's a better story within *Pacific Rim: The Black* struggling to be born. Under different circumstances and with a few more passes through the writing/editing process to strengthen the structure and focus the themes, it could have been a worthy sequel to the original film. Instead, it is merely "content," a harmless way to pass a few hours, but hardly a world-shaking work of art.

—Paul Thomas Chapman



the world now works, and the complex society woven around the fairies and their technological advancements.

For all their intelligence and talk, however, fairies still have their soft spot: anything sweet. They can reproduce simply by thinking about it, and yet they're still felled by a good, old-fashioned

because the fairies are so advanced in some ways, and regressive in many others. That helps to color Watashi's thoughts in many ways. Plus, her assistant, simply known as "Assistant," has a few hilarious thoughts of his own, but Watashi has to end up voicing them for him as he does not speak.

Watashi isn't totally alone, either. She has her best friend Y too, who has her own special place in the Human Monument Project. Where Watashi is a mediator, Y collects and stores information about humanity before its numbers began to dwindle. She's great at it, but often focuses on reading and creating boys' love manga instead.

Humanity Has Declined is a unique and intriguing exercise in what happens if you stop focusing on the bleakness of the end of the human race and look at the positives, or at least try to make jokes of it. Watashi is an entertaining narrator, and while there isn't too much connective tissue that makes for an extended tale throughout this show, there's a lot to take in that can make you laugh, or at least keep you excited to see what's coming next. So if you're hankering for some

post-apocalyptic fun that doesn't take itself too seriously, *Humanity Has Declined* is a fun, albeit strange choice that takes some liberties most series won't. Oh, and it's also extremely pleasant on the eyes.

—Brittany Vincent



humanity that are still to be found out in the wild. In this, *Humanity Has Declined* is far from your typical post-apocalyptic world.

This is a bright and colorful anime series that focuses on the childlike fairies that are extremely intelligent, the positives of the way

sweet. They can also just let their entire population fall apart by letting things get completely out of hand. Yes, that's happened all because of a few sweets, too.

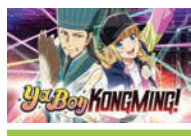
That's part of how our protagonist is able to comment on the way society has evolved,





Ya Boy Kongming!

24 hour party people



STUDIO/COMPANY
Sentai Filmworks

RATING
Not Rated

It's one thing for a title like *SPY x FAMILY*, already a major hit manga in America, to win over everybody

with its great anime adaptation. It's another thing when a much lesser-known thing comes practically out of nowhere and does the same, as is the case with *Ya Boy Kongming!*, originally titled "Paripi Komei" in Japanese ("Paripi" is an abbreviation of "Party People").

The legendary strategist Zhuge Liang (which the Japanese pronounce "Shokatsu Ryou") aka Kongming ("Komei") from China's Three Kingdoms era was the original "just as planned" mega genius. Ever popular due to frequent depictions across films, TV, anime, and videogames, the character is often portrayed with his trademark hand fan and facial hair (when not reimagined as a cute girl). After dying of old age with his final wish being for a peaceful existence, Kongming finds himself inexplicably reincarnated as his younger self, fluent in Japanese, in the epi-

center of "cool Japan" as it pertains to fashion, music, and general trendiness: modern-day downtown Shibuya.

Normally, anything involving reincarnation in parallel worlds ("isekai") is an instant "avoid" for me, but there are no "fish out of water/power fantasy" hijinks here. Kongming is moved by the singing of young Eiko, a young girl working at the BB Lounge nightclub he happened to wander into, which causes him to realize his new lot in life is not military conquest, but world peace through helping to spread Eiko's sound far and wide as her manager/personal tactician. With the world-famous 109 building (albeit with modern logo) on display, you might say that Kongming has found his "mystery frequency!"

Thankfully, *Ya Boy Kongming!* has little concern for modern "isekai" conventions. He immediately gets acquainted with the modern world and is hired by Eiko's gruff boss, who just happens to be a Three Kingdoms fanatic that hires Kongming for his period-accurate "cosplay" and ability to understand his *RoTK* references that nobody else is expected to (including the



viewer]. Thus begins our ludicrous and surprisingly heartening tale, by which Kongming uses his tactical genius and knowledge of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to raise a storm throughout the Japanese EDM, hip-

hop, and other indie/underground J-pop scenes, all while conspicuously sporting ancient Chinese robes. Look, if he was able to gather 100,000 arrows for the *Battle of Red Cliffs* (P.S.: watch the two-part ver-

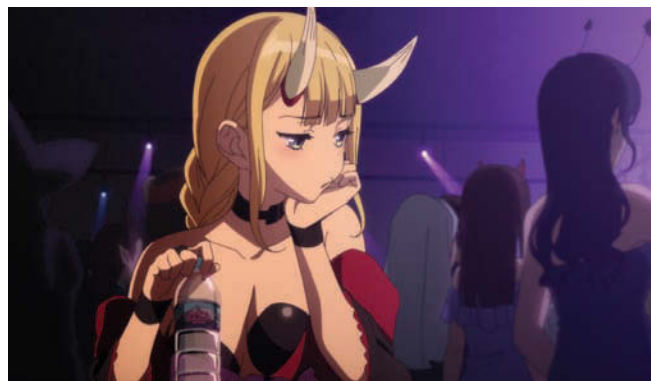
sion of that John Woo movie!), he can apply the same strategy to earn 100,000 likes for a single social media post!

The manga by Yuto Yotsuba and Ryo Ogawa is available digital-only (for now) in English from Kodansha. I enjoy it, and there are bonus stories not (yet) covered in the anime, but with this being a series primarily about music a worthy soundtrack is required. Fortunately, *Ya Boy Kongming!* just might have the most bangers of all in Spring 2022; no doubt all part of Kongming's plans to get it to go viral and convince people to check the show out! In keeping with the club/DJ aspect of the show, the opening credits sequence and theme song is the most "never to be skipped past" earworm of the year: a Japanese EDM rendition of a Hungarian disco(?) beat from 2013 by Jolly & Suzy. Ask a boomer if they remember *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, the flying car from the 1960s! Eiko's songs, including the ending theme, are provided courtesy of popular Niconico cover artist 96Neko, and between her and the other characters you won't be stuck listening to the same song over and over again as often happens in music-focused anime.

Ya Boy Kongming! is a conceptually tough sell, but its music, charm, and comic timing will win over even the most skeptical. Translating song lyrics is already tough, but translating episodes consisting of extended rap battles in which Kongming freestyles using ancient Chinese poems is one for the ages, especially on simulcast deadlines! Whatever they're paying these guys definitely isn't enough.

Recommended.

—Daryl Surat



My Wandering Manga Existence

New Manga Reviews



PUBLISHER

Viz Media

STORY AND ART
Kazuki Takahashi

RATING

T

Marvel's Secret Reverse

It is both odd and telling that both Iron Man and Spider-Man appear on the cover of *Secret Reverse* with no labels or logos explaining who they are. In the post-Marvel-movie world, everybody knows them.

The other thing I notice about the cover is totally subjective: I like Kazuki Takahashi's Spider-Man much better than his Iron Man. His Iron Man is a

perfectly good representation of the movie armor. That's fine, but it loses some points when you see how interestingly spiderish his Spider-Man is. In that respect, Takahashi comes closer to original Spider-Man artist Steve Ditko than anyone after Ditko himself. Not that Takahashi's sense of page layout is like any American superhero artist's.

If, as an artist, Takahashi is subjectively better with Spider-Man, as a writer he absolutely treats Iron Man better. That's fair. Tony Stark provides a good reason for Peter Parker to be in Japan and the plot manages to work within the MCU setting without reducing Spider-Man to the sidekick he often becomes on film.

What is the plot? It's the first thing you might think of when you hear that the creator of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is doing a Marvel story. That's right, kids, it's Marvel superheroes against what are transparently living *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards. The main villain is even dressed like the Dark Wizard card. To be fair, the Dark Wizard fits the aesthetic of the Marvel universe well. Purple is a classic Marvel bad guy color.

This being a Marvel story without Thor or Doctor Strange, the script replaces *Yu-Gi-Oh!*'s quasi-Egyptian magic with Marvel-style pseudoscience. Characters throw around the words "quantum" and "dimension" a lot because, at its heart, the Marvel universe is more comfortable with the language of science fiction than fantasy.

Takahashi himself calls this his Marvel fan comic, and that's an apt description. The art is the real selling point; the story is the lazy superhero writer's best friend, the over-powered new bad guy. The problem with open-ended powers like getting new ability every time you draw a card is that the villain seems unbeatable right up to the



MARVEL SECRET REVERSE © 2022 MARVEL. Story and Art by Kazuki Takahashi



moment when he is, in fact, beaten. He's also got a daughter running around saying things like, "Father, do not do this, I beg of you!" because, surprise surprise, he's possessed by the cards. Unless it's done very well, "I'd kick your ass if my kid wasn't here" is one of my least favorite tropes.

Overall, though, I like *Secret Reverse* quite a bit. It didn't blow my mind, but it's a solid enough superhero story with some great art from Takahashi. Compared to some of Marvel's past attempts at manga, *Secret Reverse* is *Hamlet*. (Robert McCarthy)



PUBLISHER
Kodansha
STORY
Muneyuki Kaneshiro
ART
Yusuke Nomura
RATING
16+

Blue Lock

Sports manga, like isekai, is a dime a dozen. But *Blue Lock* doesn't feel like any other sports manga. This dystopian thriller that happens to feature soccer begins after the 2018 FIFA World Cup, in which Japan's national team placed 16th. Unhappy with these results, the Japanese Football Union hires enigmatic soccer genius Ego Jinpachi. His plan: take 300 of the best young soccer players in the

country and pit them all against each other in a state-of-the-art training facility until the absolute best player emerges.

Yoichi Isagi, our protagonist, is one of the boys who finds himself selected to play against the other premier soccer prodigies. He's ranked at a lowly 299 out of 300. But he's dedicated to making his way to the top, no matter what. All of this is overseen by Anri, a newcomer to Japanese soccer who believes that sports aren't for fun, but for winning. Period. And she'll do anything to make sure that next year's World Cup isn't as bad as the previous one.

So the kids are forced into playing soccer elimination games against each other. The losers are never able to play professional soccer again. With the totally unhinged Anri and the bizarre and unsettling Jinpachi ruling over a weird state-of-the-art sports facility, the operation is a nightmare that no parent in their right mind would ever let their soccer-loving child get near.

But there's something strangely cathartic about watching shonen manga protagonists get their dreams crushed as they're forced to face reality, like the rest of us. (Kidding, kidding.) There are some interesting elements to the training that would never fly in the real world but make a twisted kind of sense in this setting, like tying the kids' food access to how well they perform, or forcing them to train all the time without shoes.

All of this combines to create a story that's almost like *Squid Game* for soccer, especially with the sense that there's an even more sinister plot underlying the kids' trials and tribulations. Though



Blue Lock is supposed to be a training facility designed to weed out all but the best, there are hints that a victor has already been chosen.

Blue Lock is an engaging read, a wholly unique twist on sports manga in which it's impossible to guess what will happen next. Instead of another optimistic story about training hard to achieve your goals, it goes off on its own dark path and becomes something exciting and fun. (Brittany Vincent)

Witches: The Complete Collection

I've been in love with Daisuke Igarashi's graceful, spindly artwork and mystic sensibility ever since Viz published his stunning sci-fi/fantasy series *Children of the Sea*. To my knowledge, none of his other work has made it to official English translation—until now. Seven Seas pro-



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment
STORY AND ART
Daisuke Igarashi
RATING
T

vides exceptional localization and lettering in its edition of Igarashi's *Witches*, an omnibus collection of darkly magical stories about witchcraft around the world.

In "Spindle," women in a desert community secretly practice magic through weaving: "Men get anxiety over the old beliefs, after all." A little girl is called by spirits to visit the nearby city and confront Nicola, a vengeful witch rising

in local politics, before her magic causes irreversible damage. In "Kuarupu," a shaman makes a deal with ravenous spirits to protect her tribe's rainforest home from developers, using the jun-

gle and its creatures as her weapons. In “Thief of Songs,” a directionless teenage girl in Japan goes on an ocean cruise and meets a mysterious, winsome woman who convinces her to visit a deserted island. The longest story, “Petra Genitalix,” combines fantasy with science fiction as a witch and her apprentice are called on to stop a stone from outer space that creates alien monsters. With witches, astronauts, the Cambrian Explosion, the Vatican, and an appearance by Krampus, it crams a lot of wild and wooly magic into 100 pages.

The stories are all enchanting in different ways: some beautiful, some horrific, some bizarre. But the big draw is Igarashi’s intensely detailed, scratchily inked art. *Witches* sometimes looks like a contemporary alternative manga, sometimes like a 1970s American indie comic, at other times like a classic storybook or a medieval illuminated manuscript. Igarashi draws gigantic nature spirits, tiny bird-riding witches, psychedelic inner voyages, skeletons on parade, and stunning images of the natural world. Together, the stories evoke a secret world of witchcraft thrumming under the surface of reality, a world where magic and nature are intertwined and ordinary moments explode into spiritual revelations. “Your world is finite,” a witch explains. “Ours is infinite.” Don’t miss the chance to visit this world. **Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media
STORY AND ART
Oto Toda
RATING
T+

To Strip the Flesh

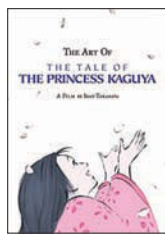
Chiaki, a trans man, lives in the closet. He and his widowed dad have a popular YouTube channel: his dad hunts game, which Chiaki dresses and cooks while trying to ignore sleazy viewer comments about his breasts. “I don’t want to die looking like this,” Chiaki reflects, but his fears of disappointing his macho father and his late mother’s memory keep him

from publicly transitioning. When his dad is diagnosed with cancer, he decides to ride out the clock: he’ll continue to live as a woman, even seeking a sham marriage with his in-the-know best friend, until his dad dies and he can live as a man. But both Chiaki and his dad have to learn to make decisions about their bodies that are truly kind.

Written and drawn by a trans man, the title story in *To Strip the Flesh* is an exceptional slice-of-life story about family love, self-love, and the hope that the people who care about you will care about every part of you. The back half of the volume is filled with much lighter but very entertaining short stories: a young J-pop fan meets the equally fangirlish grandma of her fave member, a desktop statuette of Michelangelo’s David falls in

love with his young owner, and a teenage boy casts a spell through an enchanted watermelon that causes him to experience his mother’s feelings. As eclectic as the stories are, they share a connecting thread of empathy between very different people who learn that they share a common humanity (even if one of them is a desktop statuette of Michelangelo’s David).

Toda’s strong, character-driven artwork has a level of detail suggestive of seinen manga but with an open, emotive touch. He mentions being a fan of *Chainsaw Man*, and though the two manga could hardly be more different, they share a similar gung-ho visual energy. The volume includes an interview between Toda and gay manga-ka Motigi in which they discuss the differences between sexuality and gender identity and the experiences that inspire their work. Toda stresses that *To Strip the Flesh* isn’t meant to be a universal portrayal of transgender experience. “Everyone is different, and everyone is weird,” Motigi comments, a line that could easily serve as a motto for Toda’s euphorically individual work. **Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media
STORY AND ART
Isao Takahata and Staff
RATING
All Ages

The Art of the Tale of the Princess Kaguya

Studio Ghibli’s art books are always a treasure trove, and *The Art of the Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, showcasing the studio’s most delicately beautiful film, is no exception.

To adapt “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter,” a classical Japanese fairy tale, director Isao Takahata and his staff moved away from the “baroque” realism of movies

like *Spirited Away* and developed a stripped-down animation style with the feel of loose watercolor sketches or Asian picture scrolls come to life.

As *The Art of the Tale of the Princess Kaguya* reveals, this feeling of spontaneity came through painstaking effort and experimentation. Interviews with Takahata, character designer Osamu Tanabe, art director Kazuo Oga, and digital imaging director Keisuke Nakamura provide in-depth insights into the team’s inspirations and processes, from creating the texture of kimono fabric by dabbing paint with toilet paper to developing digital coloring techniques that could mimic the look of watercolor. The extensive selection of color illustration includes concept art, character designs, storyboards, background paintings, and a section following the progress of a scene from script to final shots. The looser, more impressionistic art style allows the artists to capture lively character gestures and carefully observed details of light, water, snow, and plant life. Each detail of the production affirms composer Joe Hisaishi’s philosophy that “every flame is worthy of being its own painting.”

Viz’s production does the material right, from the engagingly conversational translations to the beautifully reproduced artwork. *The Art of the Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is an essential edition to the Studio Ghibli library. **Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER
Viz Media
STORY
Tetsuo Hara
ART
Takeshi Obata
RATING
Not Rated

Death Note Short Stories

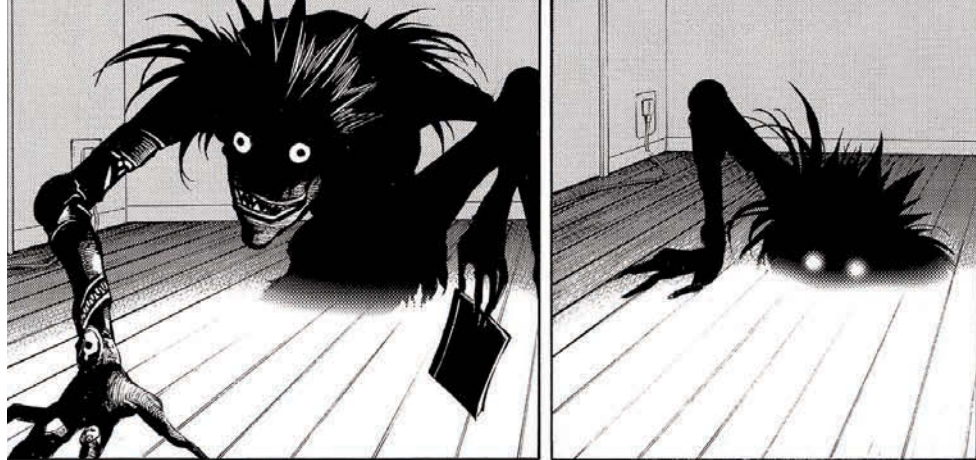
The original creators of *Death Note* return with a series of short stories set in the *Death Note* universe. Near shows up as the new L and Ryuk, our main man shinigami, is up to his old tricks and hungry for apples. The plots are every bit as ingenious as in the legendary original series. In two longer stories, new Kira-style cases come to Near’s reluctant attention.

The first involves an ill-fated attempt at mercy killing from a nameless perpetrator dubbed C-Kira. The second involves a clever scheme devised by a young man Ryuk contacts, but nothing goes according to plan when the gods of death are involved. Readers also get a peek into the daily life of the original L and several pages of four-panel gag strips.

The stories have the same thoughtful writing and feints-within-feints that *Death Note* is known for. Of course, the shorter length doesn’t allow for the elaborate plot twists or depth of character development the original series provided. Still, these stories will be a welcome addition to any fan’s library. It’s a delight to revisit the characters and the world of Kira, even if Light only appears in the gag strips.

Obata’s art is still going strong and the characters are in fine form. Obata isn’t an artist who can, or would, phone it in. Ohba’s plots are as tight as ever, populated by smart people unraveling supernatural mysteries committed by fiendishly intelligent criminals. The cerebral plotting and extensive dialogue of the series are present but pared down somewhat for the shorter format.

For newcomers to the world of *Death Note*, however, this book may disappoint. A lot of characters and plot points are meaningless without the context of the original, though the rules of the *Death Note* itself are reprinted in the collection. Anyone just discovering *Death Note* for the first time should direct themselves to the first volume of the main series. Viz no doubt knows this, as the back pages of *Death Note Short Stories* include an advertisement for the entire twelve-volume run reprinted in a gigantic omnibus with slipcase. Whether you purchase the omnibus or the individual volumes, it’s an outstanding manga full of inventive worldbuilding and the kind of Sherlockian cat-and-mouse games only the best mystery books offer. (Che Gilson)



DEATH NOTE TANPENSHU © 2003 by Tsugumi Ohba, Takeshi Obata/SHUEISHA Inc.



My Wandering Warrior Existence

Life is inherently messy. We all have a little self-doubting voice in our head, and sometimes it gets loud. Nagata Kabi, creator of *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* and *My Alcoholic Escape from Reality*, is a master at visualizing that doubt and probing the less-than-ideal parts of her life.

In her newest autobio manga, *My Wandering Warrior Existence*, a close friend's wedding leads Kabi to fantasize about marriage. The only problem is that she has no partner, no dating experience, and no

sexual experience other than using a lesbian escort service. She's hit hard by the familiar feeling one gets in one's late 20s and early 30s that suddenly everyone else is getting married and having kids, and she convinces herself that a wedding will bring her a sense of fulfillment. Luckily, Japan has services to quench just such a desire, even renting out wedding gowns for fake wedding photos. After this charade only leaves Kabi feeling lonelier, she takes to Twitter to find out if love is real.

Kabi is the wandering warrior, going through many battles and days of soul-searching on her journey to self-discovery: "I've wandered in many directions," she muses. While these experiences are often sad, she keeps things at least somewhat lighthearted while never shying away from raw honesty and chaotic, emotional art-

work. The humor comes from "too real" experiences, as she breaks down her scattershot thought processes and goes from searching for love on a dating app to developing an extreme fear of strangers while remaining unsure about her sexual orientation, gender identity, or even basic preferences in a partner.

Kabi is still in the midst of a long personal journey, and the overarching feeling of being lost will strike a chord with many. She flips between feeling ready for love and getting cold feet, but she also starts to accept and own those emotions. Rather than offer a hopeful "I did it, and so can you!" message, Kabi respects readers enough to share her doubt and conflicting thoughts. She's still in the process of piecing together her past and figuring out how it affects her present self while finding hope for the future ahead. This manga explores life's messiness in a relatable way. (Trigger warning: There is discussion of sexual assault in chapter 4.)

My Wandering Warrior Existence is a great choice for any adult questioning society's expectations, particularly from a non-gender-conforming perspective. Kabi demonstrates the intricacies of love and self-discovery in each chapter and allows for room for growth. The manga doesn't have a clear resolution, as the mangaka is still exploring her own feelings on love. The next book is sure to find Kabi further down the road to self-acceptance. (Brianna Fox-Priest)



Classroom of the Elite

The Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School is a pioneering program, an elite private school boasting graduates who have their pick of universities and jobs. But behind the ultra-modern conveniences lurks a merit system that pits student against student and class against class.

Ayanoukoji Kiyotaka has secured a slot at Metropolitan as a freshman high school student. He's put in Class D along with a prickly girl

named Horikita Suzune, whom he meets on the bus on their first day. Neither is adept at making friends, though for Suzune it's a choice. Ayanoukoji is aloof and awkward but doesn't want to repeat his lonely years in junior high. While friendship doesn't come naturally to him, he manages to partake in lewd guy talk and gossip with the other boys in his class.

However, after a month of smooth sailing, the students of Class D are given a rude awakening. Gifted with 100,000 points to spend on campus, they can purchase everything from food to video games. But then that privilege is revoked and their points denied based on the class's stand-

PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Nagata Kabi

RATING
Older Teen (15+)

PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY
Syougo Kinugasa

ART
Yuyu Ichino

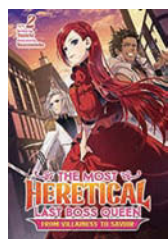
CHARACTER DESIGNS
Tomoseshunsaku

RATING
13+

ing. Class D, full of the students who barely squeaked into Metropolitan, finds itself penniless unless it can elevate itself to the status enjoyed by Class A. Suzune is determined to claw her way up the ladder but lacks the people to skills to lead. Ayanoukoji wants to help, but he finds himself in trouble with a few other students in his class.

Despite being described as a psychological thriller in the back cover copy, the first volume of *Classroom of the Elite* is a slow burn without many thrills. A lot of time is spent on the boys' adolescent male fantasies about their female classmates and plenty of who's-dating-who drama. There's also an excessive amount of fan service, most of which has nothing to do with the plot and serves no purpose other than putting teenage girls in sexy lingerie.

In spite of its flaws, the series has an interesting premise, and the long setup may pay off in future volumes. There are a few glimpses of the school's dark side that could develop into something interesting. The artwork is very competent; at the very least, the various female characters are distinguishable. The two male leads also stand out, though there are at least three other male students in class who blend into one horny lump. Readers who can either embrace or ignore the fanservice will be rewarded with a clever drama and the promise of a dark, unfolding mystery. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY
Tenichi

ART
Bunko Matsuura

CHARACTER DESIGN
Suzunosuke

RATING
13+

The Most Heretical Last Boss Queen: From Villainess to Savior

Princess Pride Royal Ivy awakens from a nightmare at the age of eight with the sudden memory that she was once a Japanese teenager and now inhabits the body of the villainess from her favorite otome game. In the game, Pride Ivy is a spoiled despot who torments the protagonist, her little sister Tiara Ivy, before dying multiple horrible deaths in the game's various endings. Pride realizes she's doomed to die at the age of eighteen and vows to help the people of her kingdom until her video-game fate comes to pass.

But Pride's newfound self-awareness flips the script. Her adopted brother Stale Ivy, whom she forced into slavery and worse in the game, is treated with kindness instead. Tiara, the little sister Pride was so jealous of, is now a beloved sibling. While Pride's sudden personality shift is chalked up to her powers of premonition, only Pride knows it's because she's played this game repeatedly and knows all the outcomes. As palace power players scheme against her, Pride may be able to avert her death in the final boss battle.

A good redemption story is a joy to read, and this one is plenty of fun. As Pride remembers scenes from the game, she sees what a reprehensible dictator she could become and is inspired to be a better person. Will her efforts pay off? Or will the kindly Princess Pride still bring doom to herself and those she loves? Only future volumes (or reading the light novels) will tell.

Last Boss boasts excellent art with some great character designs from Suzunosuke. Manga artist Matsuura does a great job at translating the light novel illustrations to manga form, and every character is detailed and unique. A lot of skill is lavished on the clothing, although the setting is a generic eighteenth-century Western kingdom. More complex backgrounds would have enlivened and elevated the book. Still, the plot and characters shine through, and there's plenty of opportunity for more twists to come. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Drawn and Quarterly

STORY AND ART
Yamada Murasaki

RATING
15+

Talk to My Back

Chiharu is a homemaker who's gone through the motions for years, never stopping to take time for herself. Most of her time is spent doing housework and raising the kids alone while her husband is off at work. When she does have a spare moment, it's spent ruminating on how she can't focus enough to watch the TV that's blaring in the living room or read the book open in front of her. Even going out to do errands reminds her that for six years, she's never lived as her own person.

At the same time, there's a duality to her, a side that misses her children when they're off at school and wants to savor every moment they're together, whether it's putting sugar on strawberries or laughing at their strangely-named paper dolls. But the laughs and tender moments are few and far between, and Chiharu is deeply lonely. She lives vicariously through her children, reliving her own youth, imagining the difficulties of growing up in the modern world, and wondering how the future will be for her kids as society continues to evolve. Her husband is little or no help. When he isn't criticizing the way Chiharu is raising their children, he's demanding another cup of coffee or pointing out chores that haven't been done. Their love seems to have long ago dried up and withered away.

A masterpiece of alternative manga from the 1980s, *Talk to My Back* paints a vivid picture of a functioning but loveless marriage. It's a sadly familiar story of a woman who never quite receives the love she deserves, stuck in a relationship she doesn't enjoy with children she may not have wanted to have in the first place. It's a bleak yet deeply heartwarming portrait of wom-

anhood and the forced domesticity some find themselves sliding into after marriage. It's also a mirror that readers may see themselves reflected in, revealing dreams cut short as a sacrifice for their children, husbands who see them as little more than servants, and friends who gossip about infidelity and their wifely duties.

With Murasaki's insightful character writing and tender, delicate artwork, the storytelling feels fresh and modern despite its now-retro setting. It careens through a variety of vignettes that do an agonizingly perfect job of showcasing the frustrations and sacrifices women around the world deal with silently on a daily basis. Just like life, it shows us peaceful moments but also forces us to watch during the difficult ones. If you're drawn to stories about the challenges women face as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters, and the struggle to be themselves, this is a must-read. **Recommended.** (Brittany Vincent)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Yoichi Abe

RATING
13+

Sheeply Horned Witch Romi

The cute cover art and exclamation-mark-heavy back cover copy of *Sheeply Horned Witch Romi* are misleading. The cover description is light and perky and makes the manga sound like a romantic comedy. While it starts out lighthearted enough, a dark undercurrent emerges in this offbeat fantasy, culminating in a climax at the end of the first volume that promises to change everything.

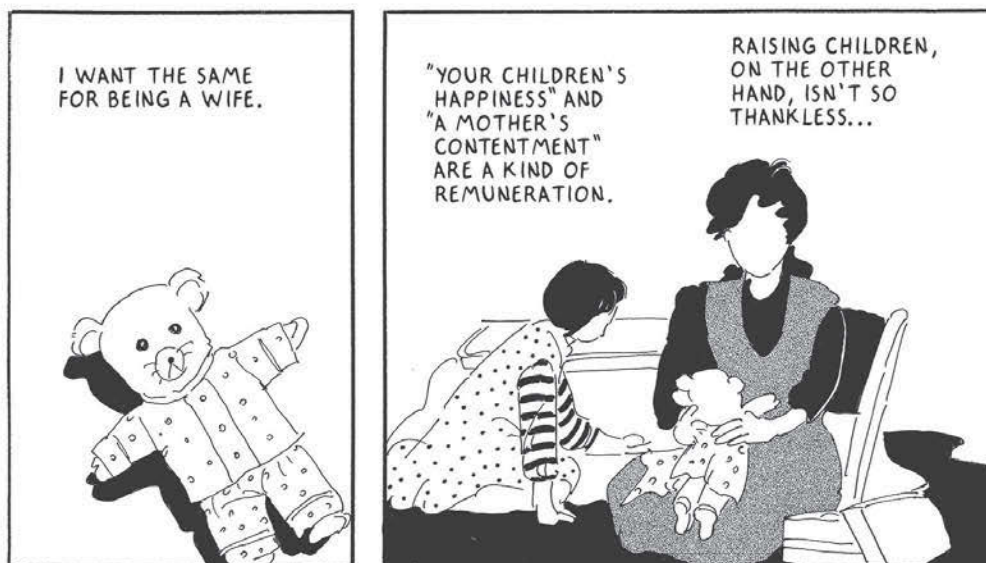
Uryuu, an artistically-inclined teenage boy, awakens one day to find the world vastly altered. Everyone else is asleep and has been for an unknown amount of time. Strange sheep haunt the school's weed-choked hallways. The only other person he can find awake is Sawada, an underclassman from his school, who now sports a pair of sheep horns. Sawada tells him that she's a witch and used her powers to put everyone to sleep, a claim Uryuu has trouble believing despite the evidence at hand.

Alone together in a ruined city overtaken by coral reefs and monsters, at first the two play games. Sawada delights in messing with her senpai, shocking him with her sexuality and showing off her weird powers; Uryuu goes along with her but grows curious about their true situation. As danger threatens, they're finally forced to go outside the protected school grounds to explore. Uryuu, a one-man manga club, hopes to make a monster manual of the creatures they encounter. However, revelations about Uryuu's past and Sawada's uncertain humanity threaten to tear their fragile new reality apart.

Surreal and steeped in emotion, *Sheepishly Horned Witch Romi* is a bizarre trip through an



From Talk to My Back by Yamada Murasaki, translated by Ryan Holmberg. Images courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly.



emotional landscape. The art is phenomenal, with a style that departs from the smooth fine lines and digital perfection of most mainstream manga and evokes a heavier, sketchy hand-drawn look. Thick blacks are carved out with white, creating the look of old-fashioned woodcuts. There's an organic messiness that brings every panel to life in a way slick polish often doesn't. The surrealist landscape combines with a sense of melancholy that underlies everything, even Sawada's sometimes shocking earthiness and Uryuu's typical teen awkwardness. The

emotions and the plot reach a crescendo which will leave readers thirsting for more. The toughest part will be waiting for the next volume.

Recommended. (Che Gilson)

Yakuza Reincarnation

Aging gangster Ryu is a relic from an age of chivalrous Tokyo gangs that defended their neighborhoods and built ties with the community. But those days are as gone as Ryu's once-young spine. Caught on camera beating some young punks, Ryu decides to turn himself in to



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment
STORY
Takeshi Natsuhara
ART
Hiroki Miyashita
RATING
15+

the cops, but an old subordinate convinces him to go into hiding instead. Unfortunately, it turns out to be a trap. Finally beaten, Ryu drowns in Tokyo Bay, only to awaken in the body of the young Princess Riyu in a fantasy land full of magic and mayhem. While the world may be new, problems stay the same, and Riyu finds that a lifetime of street smarts just might save her kingdom, one brawl at a time.

Yakuza Reincarnation is a fun spin on the isekai genre. Instead of a naïve young protagonist awakening to brand-new powers in a fantasy world, we get an aging gangster whose old skills are dusted off. A lifetime of fighting means Princess Riyu can kick some major ass. Of course, a princess can't do everything alone, so Riyu is accompanied by the stiff-necked knight Giovanni and an elven spellcaster named Nyui (whom Riyu promptly dubs "Ears").

Miyashita does a nice job on the art, with sketchy linework and consistently drawn characters. Unfortunately, the art sometimes gets a little too loose, with confusing contrasts and screentones filling in for effective drawing. The best part of the artwork is the wild perspective drawing used to amusingly distort the characters' faces and add horror to the monsters Riyu faces.

Yakuza Reincarnation is an entertaining entry into the overcrowded isekai field. It cleverly takes advantage of its lead character's disposition to give readers a tough-talking princess who can back up her threats with her fists. It's fun to see Riyu filter everything through Ryu's experiences on the tough streets of postwar Tokyo. Populated with colorful characters, a solid plot, and generally satisfying art, this is a promising new series for anyone who enjoys kick-ass fantasy adventures. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment
STORY AND ART
Okushou
STORY AND ART
MGME
RATING
Older Teen (17+)

The Girl in the Arcade

Plain, dull Mobuo works part-time at an arcade after school, keeping a low profile while restocking the prize machines. When it seems like things are about to get out of hand with the local street punks, a stunningly beautiful girl named Nanora lays them out with a spinning heel kick. Mobuo is relieved to not get involved any further, but then the girl marches up to him to extort a mascot plush out of the establishment as compensation for sneaking peeks at her panties.

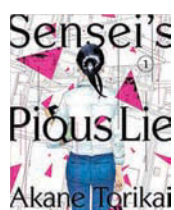
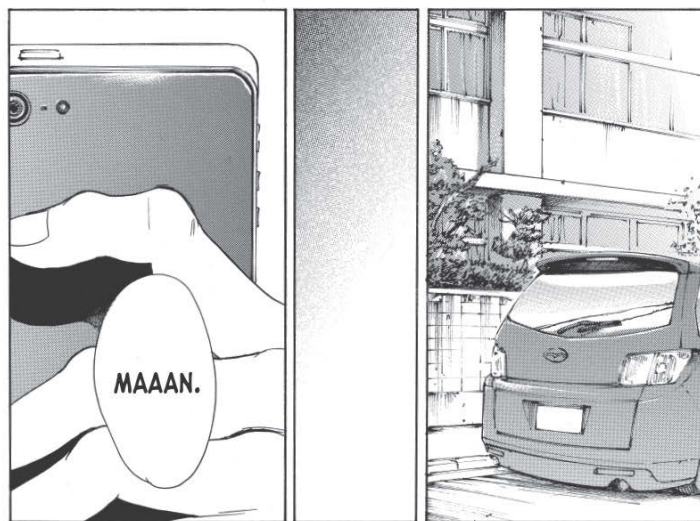
The Girl in the Arcade rides the current trend of stories about a hot girl teasing a withdrawn nerd, from the coyly comedic (*Teasing Master Takagi-san*) to the frankly horny (*2.5 Dimensional Seduction*). *Girl* falls into the latter category; most of the creative energy from creator duo Okushou and MGME is channeled into devising increasingly ridiculous excuses to ogle the heroine's boobs and butt from all angles. The setting mostly serves as window dressing, and any attempt to faithfully recreate an authentic arcade atmosphere goes out the window whenever Nanora does something silly like flopping her breasts on the buttons to execute a super move in a legally-distinct *Street Fighter* knock-off. Don't pick up this book expecting *High Score Girl* or any of the other gaming manga out there that offer exhaustive attention to the ins and outs of gameplay.

The first volume of *The Girl in the Arcade* works its one idea into the ground before ending with the appearance of a token rival, Mobuo's childhood friend Shigure, another blindingly perfect girl who is excellent at sports, gets good grades, and, of course, has big breasts. How Mobuo is able to attract the attention of two separate gorgeous girls with the patience for medal games is a question that's left unanswered, but any reader familiar with harem manga will understand that he's not really a character, just a vessel through which to experience the fantasy of playing co-op *House of the Dead* with a girl who keeps busting out of her top. Seven Seas markets the book with a prominent Parental Advisory tag on the back cover, which it earns with a few shots of bare nipples and a scene featuring a touchy-feely cartoon squid, but most of the book is too tame to merit a cautionary label.

Okushou's afterword at the end of the first volume implies that the concept was filed away in a bin of scrapped ideas until an editor came through with MGME, whose art does most of the heavy lifting to bring the thin idea to life. Although MGME has a great talent for drawing gravity-defying boing-boing action, the mild eroticism in this manga is pretty reserved for an artist who made a name drawing ero-manga. While there's always space on the shelf for lightly spicy manga, the final product is fairly bland, lacking either the software pornography of a real erotic manga, the hardware pornography of a real gaming manga, or characters with enough depth to give the fluffy concept some substance. (David Estrella)



Sensei's Pious Lie © Akane Torikai/Kodansha Ltd.



PUBLISHER
Vertical Comics

STORY AND ART
Akane Torikai

RATING
18+

Sensei's Pious Lie is a brutally realistic look at a protagonist dealing with trauma and abuse in far from ideal ways.

Misuzu has been deeply affected by the rape she suffered from her friend's fiancé. She continues to have to interact with him on a regular basis and even harbors a confused attraction to him as he emotionally blackmails her, which results in a hatred and distrust of her own body

Sensei's Pious Lie

Misuzu Hara is a 24-year-old high school teacher who judges her students while attempting to educate them. Under the massive chip on her shoulder, she's holding in pain from a terrible secret. Though she appears cool and indifferent toward her students (and everyone else, for that matter), the inner turmoil she faces is heartbreaking. *Sensei's Pious Lie*

and even frustrate you. But that lack of sugar-coating makes it a story worth exploring.

Recommended. (Brittany Vincent)



PUBLISHER
Vertical Comics

STORY AND ART
Junji Ito

RATING
15+

he, like his disturbing little sister Chizumi, has a gruesome secret. Welcome to Junji Ito's *Dissolving Classroom*.

When the Azawa siblings transfer in, their new classmate Keiko Arisu notices immediately

and an inability to enjoy pleasure. Embittered by the way women are treated in society, she takes out her feelings on one of her students, Niizuma, who's having an affair with an older woman. Instead of helping him get through the situation, she cruelly rebuffs him.

Many of Misuzu's choices will frustrate you or downright make you dislike her, but they're the fully believable actions of a person hurt and bewildered by trauma. Niizuma is a complex character as well; he feels guilt over his situation, but he's also confused—and harbors a fear of women's bodies that he can't entirely articulate. When Misuzu tells him it's something he'll just have to "live" with, the pain Niizuma feels is palpable. There are no punches pulled in the emotional confrontations between the characters.

It's a bleak story, with frank depictions of sexual assault and abuse. Torikai remains raw and honest throughout, illustrating the unfolding action with art that's strikingly beautiful without glamorizing the subject matter. If you're looking for a happy-go-lucky romance with characters you'll quickly fall in love with or drama that keeps you coming back for more, *Sensei's Pious Lie* isn't it. It will make you uncomfortable, push you away at times,

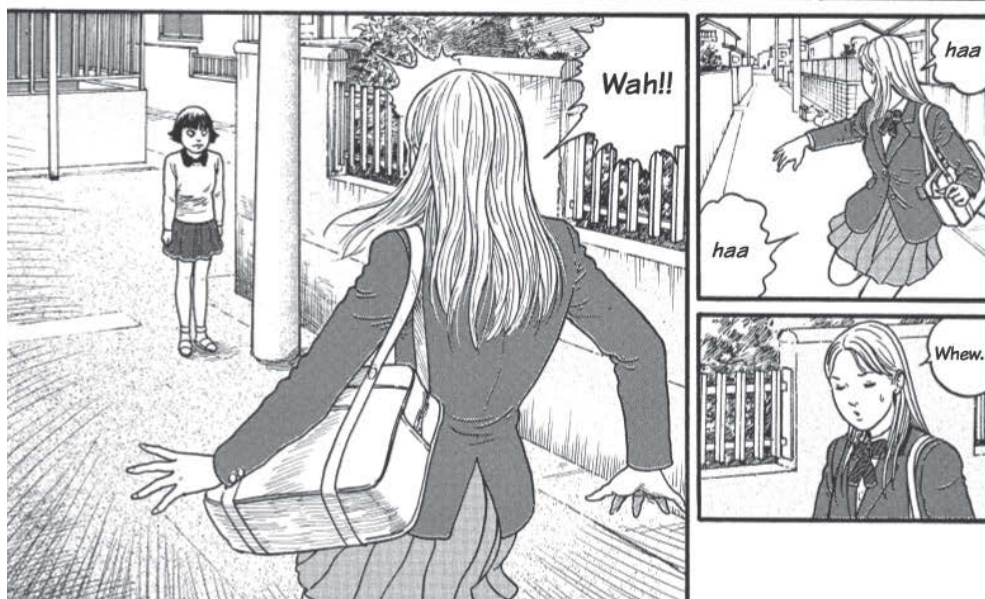
Dissolving Classroom

The first thing new student Yuuma Azawa does when standing in front of his classmates at Hikage High School is apologize profusely. From that point on, he continues to apologize all the time, to everyone, everywhere, for even the slightest perceived transgression. It might seem like some sort of disorder, or an anxious tic. In reality,

Yuuma is apologizing because



Dissolving Classroom © Junji Ito/Akita Publishing Co., Ltd.



that something is off. She tries to get Yuuma to stop apologizing so much, only to have Chizumi jump out in front of her and exclaim, "Gimme your brains! Lemme suck out your soft, juicy brains!" She soon ends up in the hospital and learns that the Azawas are bad, bad news. How bad, exactly? Yuuma's apologies have the effect of melting people into liquefied corpses, which Chizumi then snacks on. These siblings have Satanic power, and everywhere they go they leave a trail of disturbingly deformed bodies in their wake.

Dissolving Classroom establishes this premise quickly before introducing vignettes in which the sinister siblings wreak havoc on just about everyone they meet. It's unclear whether Yuuma means to apologize to people to death or whether he's doing it unknowingly. Readers do get some backstory about Chizumi's transfor-

mation from cute little sister to hellspawn, which adds a hint of depth to a character so deeply creepy that just looking at her for page after page is downright unsettling.

And everything these kids get up to is just as disturbing, as when Keiko visits their house and unwittingly happens upon the skulls of their mother and father, whose "brains already leaked out." When the phenomenon starts to affect the rest of the town and Keiko's own family, the situation gets even hairier...and devolves into something you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy.

If you're a Junji Ito fan, *Dissolving Classroom* won't stand out as the master's absolute best work, but there are plenty of scares and gross-out imagery throughout this volume, especially if you're into body horror. It's certainly inventive and bizarre, and for readers who need to finish

off with something a little less terrifying, the bonus stories have more of a horror-comedy vibe. If you're looking for thrills and chills, *Dissolving Classroom* delivers, but you'll find Ito's best work elsewhere. (Brittany Vincent)



Ghost Reaper Girl

Take one cup of *Ghostbusters* and add a heap of *Sailor Moon*, mix well, and you have *Ghost Reaper Girl*, an action-filled adventure comedy from the creator of *Rosario+Vampire*. Chloe Love is a struggling actress; at the age of 28, all she's managed to play are dead bodies and background characters. Except for one ill-fated, short-lived starring role as Ghost Reaper Girl, her

career has stalled out. But a jailbreak of evil spirits who rip their way out of Hades changes everything. Chloe discovers she's a spirit medium with the power to exorcise the evil dead, but this also makes her the perfect vessel for possession herself. Attacked by a possessed movie producer intent on inhabiting her body, Chloe is rescued by a handsome stranger named Kai. When Kai, an agent of Hades, possesses Chloe, she transforms into a real-life Ghost Reaper Girl.

The art is excellent, populated with charming characters, first and foremost Chloe and Kai. Chloe's youthful looks belie a tough core developed during her childhood as a homeless slum dweller. The specters and monsters could be creepier—90% of the ghosts look like Slimer's extended family—but they do grow more grotesque as the book goes on, so perhaps Saiké is saving the best designs for future volumes. The story moves along at a fast pace with plenty of amusing character interactions and several laugh-out-loud lines. The fight sequences have a panel-to-panel clarity that makes them both dynamic and easy to read. The plot takes some nice turns as the cast expands; in one memorable confrontation, Chloe battles a cursed cat monster that has evolved into a human form (more or less) and earns his eternal devotion.

Towards the end of Volume One, *Ghost Reaper Girl* takes a hilarious and terrifying swerve into MIB territory, as Kai introduces Chloe to the Bureau of Arkham Bullet, the Hades department he works for. *Ghost Reaper Girl* is a solid, supernatural thriller with plenty of chills and laughs. **Recommended.** (Che Gilson)

My Brain is Different: Stories of ADHD and Other Developmental Disorders

For those living with ADHD, autism, or other neurodivergent conditions, it can be difficult to explain the pitfalls of everyday life. Unfortunately



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Monzusu

RATING
T

for many, the stigma attached to these conditions can keep people from seeking treatment or developing alternative communication methods and relationships.

That's why books like *My Brain is Different: Stories of ADHD and Other Developmental Disorders* are so important. This nonfiction manga anthology collects the stories of nine different people who live with develop-

mental disorders. The mangaka, Monzusu, was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, while her son was diagnosed as a child. We learn how ADHD has affected Monzusu and her family before we launch into the rest of the stories.

The book covers much more than ADHD, though. The individuals we read about have a variety of different conditions, including depression, schizophrenia, and learning disabilities. The stories run the gamut from explaining how the subjects deal with these issues to exploring how they perceive the world, providing a different perspective each time.

While each anecdote is entertaining and educational, the collection isn't meant as a reference book or a teaching aid. The stories feel like intimate conversations with a friend or family member. There are no difficult scientific terms you need to learn or extensive medical explanations to bog each story down. Instead, the tales are entertaining but thought-provoking. When a story helps open the reader's eyes, it transcends simply existing as media and becomes an experience in empathy.

Monzusu's deeply personal account of dealing with ADHD is a story that will likely hit home for many readers, as will many of the other tales. If you or someone you know deals with neurodivergent conditions or you're just curious about the inner workings of people's minds, *My Brain is Different* is a great place to start. It can be eye-opening in ways you may not expect.

Recommended. (Brittany Vincent)

Ima Koi: Now I'm in Love

When it comes to high school romances in manga form, there are some tropes that are turning from classic to a little stale: silent frustration, miscommunication, will-they-or-won't-they storylines, and, most irritatingly, a protagonist who just won't go after what they want. Happily, none of that applies to *Ima Koi: Now I'm in Love*. This is a teen romance that takes a refreshing approach to bringing its potential lovers together.

The story starts off with a familiar setup, though. Satomi Mizusawa is riding the train when a groper tries to have his way with her. In the nick of time, a boy from Satomi's school

IMA, KOIWO SHITEIMASU. ©2019 by Ayuko Hatta



shields her from the man's advances. Satomi is immediately enamored with the boy, but instead of sitting alone and pining over him for chapter after chapter, she tracks him down to say thank you and find out his name: Yagyu.

Satomi has made an important decision for herself: she's not going to let any opportunities pass her by. She missed out on love with a boy she liked once before because she couldn't bring herself to tell him how she felt. This time around, she's not going to take any chances. She promises herself to tell Yagyu how she feels, and



when, before very long, she does, Yagyu is super into it. Just like that, the two are dating.

If it sounds incredulous, that's because you've probably read one too many shojo romances where the characters suffer in silence for volume after volume. It's such a nice change of pace from all of the infuriatingly slow romance manga out there right now that the first volume is worth picking up for this reason alone. Aside from that, it's a pleasure to follow how *Ima Koi* treats this new couple. There aren't instantaneous fireworks between them. They simply spend time together,



PUBLISHER

Viz Media

STORY AND ART

Ayuko Hattai

RATING

T

get to know what makes each other tick, and grow to care for one another.

Every relationship has to start somewhere, and *Ima Koi* gives readers a chance to see how love can blossom between two protagonists aren't automatically head over heels for each other but want to see where this whole "dating thing" takes them.

Gorgeous artwork and romantic scene-setting ZXs-

story. Most of all, if you're sick and tired of reading the same romance over and over with interchangeable, tropey characters, *Ima Koi* should be in your must-read list. Given the direction the first volume has already gone in, it should be an exciting journey. (Brittany Vincent)

Tokyo Revengers

Takemichi Hanagaki has, for all intents and purpose, hit rock bottom. He lives in a shitty apartment, he's got no prospects for the future, his boss treats him like an idiot, and he hasn't had a girlfriend since middle school. Speaking of which, he finds out one day that his middle-school flame Hinata and her brother were killed in a gang-related accident. The gang in question: the Tokyo Manji Gang. But he's barely got time to



PUBLISHER

Kodansha

STORY AND ART

Ken Wakui

RATING

16+

ponder this before someone pushes him in front of a train. That's when he's suddenly sent twelve years into the past, back to his middle-school days. To prevent this terrible future, he decides to climb to the top of the toughest gang in town so that, in time, he can take down the Tokyo Manji Gang.

When was the last time you had a chance to sit down and enjoy some good old-fash-

ioned time-travel shenanigans? When was the last time you read a manga about old-school Tokyo delinquents? Probably in the eighties or nineties, right? Well, *Tokyo Revengers* has you covered on both fronts with a setup reminiscent of *Erased* or *Back to the Future*, but with more street fights. Time leaps and gangs aren't really new in the grand scheme of storytelling, but this book brings the best of both worlds together into a gripping action saga. The arcs covered in this brand-new omnibus edition (covering two volumes of the original series per volume) only touch the tip of the gang-berg, but that doesn't make them any less thrilling.

But it's ultimately not the time travel gimmick that will win you over. What does the trick is the protagonist himself, who hits the sweet spot

between two distinct manga archetypes: the blank-slate protagonist and the eager go-getter. Despite being raised in a violent environment, Takemichi is a kind, affectionate kid. When we first meet him as a disappointed adult, it's not the brawls he looks back on fondly, but his relationship with Hinata.

Ken Wakui has an eye for exaggerated, almost cartoonish action, which adds flair to the brutality of gang culture. You know how when a punch connects in *One Piece*, it results in bulging eyes and shockwave-like ripples? The same kind of cartoon physics are at play in *Tokyo Revengers*, and Wakui knows how to make the violence just absurd enough. He packs panels with crowds of characters without making the pages overwhelming to look at. The art is crisp and full of detail, with every major character sporting his or her own distinct character design. It's a unique visual execution that breathes style.

The draw of *Tokyo Revengers* isn't so much the raw action scenes and detailed brutality—although many fans would gladly refute that notion—but the underlying story of desperation and vulnerability. The compelling combination of being offered a second chance and confronting your inner demons has earned the manga much-deserved praise, including the Kodansha Manga Award. The new omnibus proves you can't keep a good delinquent down. **Recommended.** (Michael Goldstein)

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Maile Flanagan
the voice of
Naruto!

FORGED

IN

Elegance

SPY x FAMILY is the breakout anime hit of the season!

By Daryl Surat



Sometimes the most wholesome and adorable families are the ones that aren't actually related and also occasionally inflict violence on others. You know, for laughs! Such is the lesson of *SPY x FAMILY*, a title which conveys everything you need to know regarding what it's about. (The "x" is silent, by the way, much like it is in *HUNTER x HUNTER* or *xxxHolic*.)

In a fictional era, evocative of the 20th century's Cold War, before the advent of personal computers, there are two European-style countries reminiscent of the Iron Curtain-era West Germany and East Germany: Westalis and Ostania, whose governments are at clandestine odds with one another. To stop tensions from escalating to all-out open warfare, the Westalis covert intelligence agency WISE has assigned their finest secret agent, a master of disguise code-named "Twilight," to spy on Donovan Desmond, a highly reclusive leader of Ostanian political extremists who only appears during social





functions held at the prestigious private school Eden College ("Eden Academy" in the Viz manga) which his sons attend. Eden is highly conservative and only accepts students from a traditional nuclear family, and that's a problem as their annual admissions is but one week after Twilight receives his assignment.

Upon forging the identity of an Ostanian psychiatrist, our intrepid spy assumes the name "Loid Forger" (subtle!) and goes about hastily recruiting stand-ins for a family, and that's when the sitcom hijinks commence. For despite being a master of disguise, meticulous planner, analytical genius, and man of action, Loid Forger doesn't realize that he's not the only one keeping big secrets. For his gorgeous stand-in wife, the delightfully oblivious Yor Forger (née Briar), isn't just absent-minded and slightly dimwitted when it comes to domestic life. Unbeknownst to Loid, the exceedingly polite Yor is actually an extremely deadly assassin with superhuman strength, code named "Thorn Princess," who needs the sham marriage as a cover since in this Cold War-era environment, the notion of being a single woman in her late 20s is highly suspicious. The identity and motivation of Yor's "shopkeeper" (employer) is not initially known, but odds are roughly one hundred percent that she is NOT a hunter from the future,

as the name "Yor" suggests. I can totally see her hang gliding using a pterodactyl.

And then there's adorable little orphan Anya—she's lived a hard-knock life, given that she's not permanently traumatized at having evildoers threaten her—the kindergarten/first grade-aged girl whom Loid adopts from a shady orphanage to pose as his daughter. As super-spy Loid doesn't know of the true identity of the assassin Yor and vice versa, neither Loid nor Yor know that Anya is in fact a mind-reading psychic who can tell who everybody really is and what they're actually thinking. That the only one with full knowledge of the situation is a cute kid whose worldview is primarily shaped by her favorite cartoon ("Spy Wars") frequently results in Anya making highly exaggerated and hilarious facial reactions, each of which is meme-able. Anya's motivations for maintaining the façade are the most pure-hearted: she wants a mother and father who won't abandon her. Also, she's thrilled at living out the cloak-and-dagger adventures as seen on television. As the series progresses, other characters with secret identities and capabilities are added into the mix, and everybody's scrambling to conceal who they are, what they can do, and what they know as work,

RATHER THAN BE DOUR AND RIFE WITH AMORALITY LIKE TRADITIONAL SPY NARRATIVES, SPY X FAMILY IS A CHEERFUL, LIGHT-HEARTED ROMANTIC COMEDY SPRINKLED WITH A TOUCH OF MAYHEM.





school, and social life obligations throw wrenches into the works.

Indeed, getting admitted to Eden is merely the beginning (and a somewhat foregone conclusion once you see the opening and ending credits). Once inside, a whole new set of social and academic challenges presents themselves, for the functions Donovan attends are only open to the most elite of elites, denoted by a merits and demerits system. With the success of Loid's mission progressively dependent on factors and individuals entirely outside of his direct control, the spy who only trusts himself must now put his faith in others while also taking on side missions at the same time. Even covert spy agencies are subject to personnel shortages, and it gives an excuse to turn any mundane activity into a potential powder keg.

This anime adaptation of Tatsuya Endo's widely beloved *Shonen Jump+* manga had sky high expectations of quality, and WIT Studio (the non-final seasons of *Attack on Titan*) in conjunction with Cloverworks have delivered. The appeal and tone of *SPY x FAMILY* lies in its striking char-

acters as well as exciting, yet uncluttered action integrated with comedic timing. Translating all of that from the page to the screen is a daunting task, but fortunately they got the best people for the job. Most notable for me is director Kazuhiro Furuhashi, who has consistently proven himself over the decades to be one of the most versatile in anime with his deft handling of not just action, comedy, and drama but also credibly depicting historical periods in titles such as *Rurouni Kenshin*, the most recent adaptation of *Dororo*, the original *You're Under Arrest*, the superb yet overlooked *Haikara-san: Here Comes Miss Modern*, and the due-for-discovery *Le Chevalier d'Eon*.

As the manga remains ongoing and this level of quality commitment requires time, the wise decision was made for this initial season of *SPY x FAMILY* to be split in half. With each episode typically adapting one chapter of the manga (occasionally two), there should be no risk of needing to pad things out for time or otherwise deviate from the source material which has been ongoing since 2019. In the meantime, Viz Media is publishing *SPY x FAMILY* both in print as well as digitally on the Shonen Jump website. Whereas in Japan, a hit manga results in an anime adaptation, for American otaku it often takes a hit anime adaptation to drive audiences to then read the manga, which may or may not be popular beforehand. Although *SPY x FAMILY* was a hit out the gate, expect popularity to skyrocket further with this anime, especially with its English language dub also being produced alongside the simulcast. Nothing has been announced as of this writing, but the odds of this airing on US cable TV are pretty darned high, so keep those "Anya Forger will grow up to be Haman Karn from *ZZ Gundam*" jokes at the ready!

***SPY x FAMILY* is available from Crunchyroll.**



A GENUINE FORGERY

Rather than be dour and rife with amorality like traditional spy narratives, *SPY x FAMILY* is a cheerful, light-hearted romantic comedy sprinkled with a touch of mayhem and (never too graphic) violence. For, as we learned from *Mob Psycho 100* as well as the better installments of the *Fast and Furious* movies, sometimes the best families are when a bunch of loner misfits complete one another (and blow stuff up, but only every once in a while). In so doing, this "fake" family of literal forgers is more heartfelt and "real" than many commonly depicted in popular fiction. The underlying message of *SPY x FAMILY* is best encapsulated in my elderly noggin by the song lyrics from the final episode of *Jem and the Holograms*: "Family is people in touch; people who come through in the clutch. Family is people who give all they've got, if they're related or if they're not. Family is a state of mind. Take a look and you will find family is people you love."

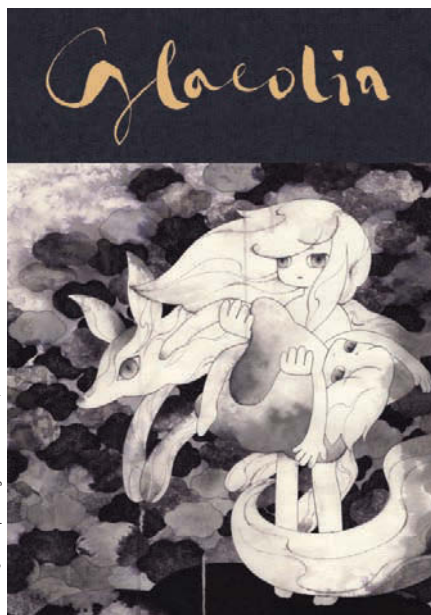




OTAKUUSA

MANGA PREVIEWS

We bet you know how this works already, but for those of you in the cheap seats, our manga section is printed in the correct Japanese format, to be read from right to left. Begin on the upper right of each two-page spread, reading each panel right-to-left, from the right page to the left. Click the arrow on the right side to advance to the following pages.



Glaeolia 3 cover painting © Chizu Wada.

GLAEOLIA 3: "THE INVISIBLE WOMAN VS THE MASTER SWINDLER"

PAGE 39

Story and Art by Nishimura Tsuchika

The third volume of the Ignatz Award-winning indie manga anthology series, Glaeolia 3 collects over 400 pages of one-shot indie manga by 13 authors that are disparate in both style and subject matter. Including works from alternative manga masters already well-known to English readers such as Nishimura Tsuchika, Yuichi Yokoyama, and Kondoh Akino, this volume also features many works from authors that are until now unpublished in English. Completely self-contained, this is an intense new volume of what's been called "quietly one of the coolest things in manga."

This preview features an excerpt from "The Invisible Woman vs the Master Swindler" by Nishimura Tsuchika.

Available now!



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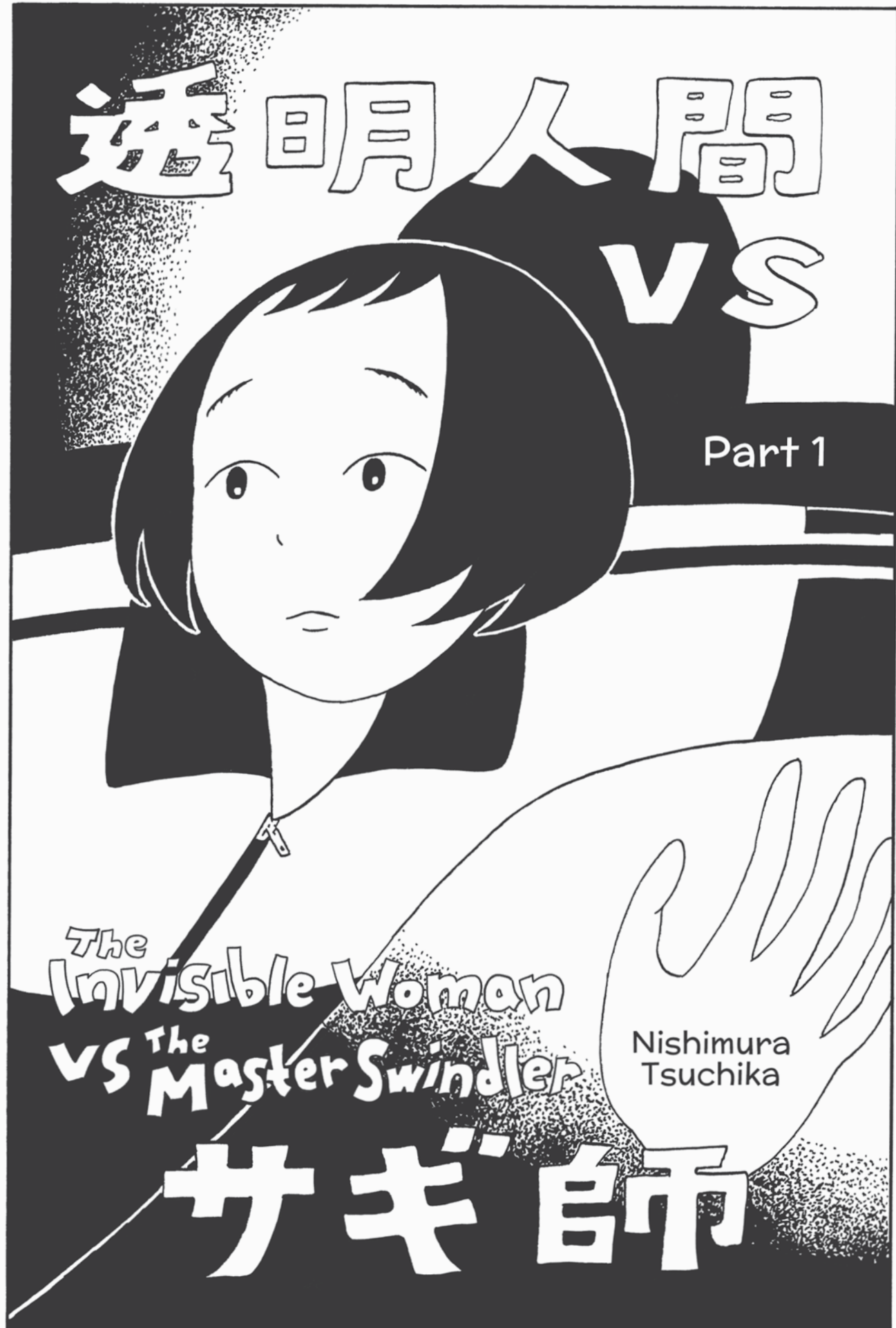
TO STRIP THE FLESH

PAGE 55

Story and Art by Oto Toda

Chiaki Ogawa has never doubted who he is, although the rest of the world hasn't been as kind. Bound by his mother's dying wish, Chiaki tries to be a good daughter to his ailing father. But when the burden becomes too great, Chiaki sets out to remake himself in his own image and discovers more than just personal freedom in his transition—he finds understanding from the people who matter most.

Available now!



透明人間
VS

Part 1

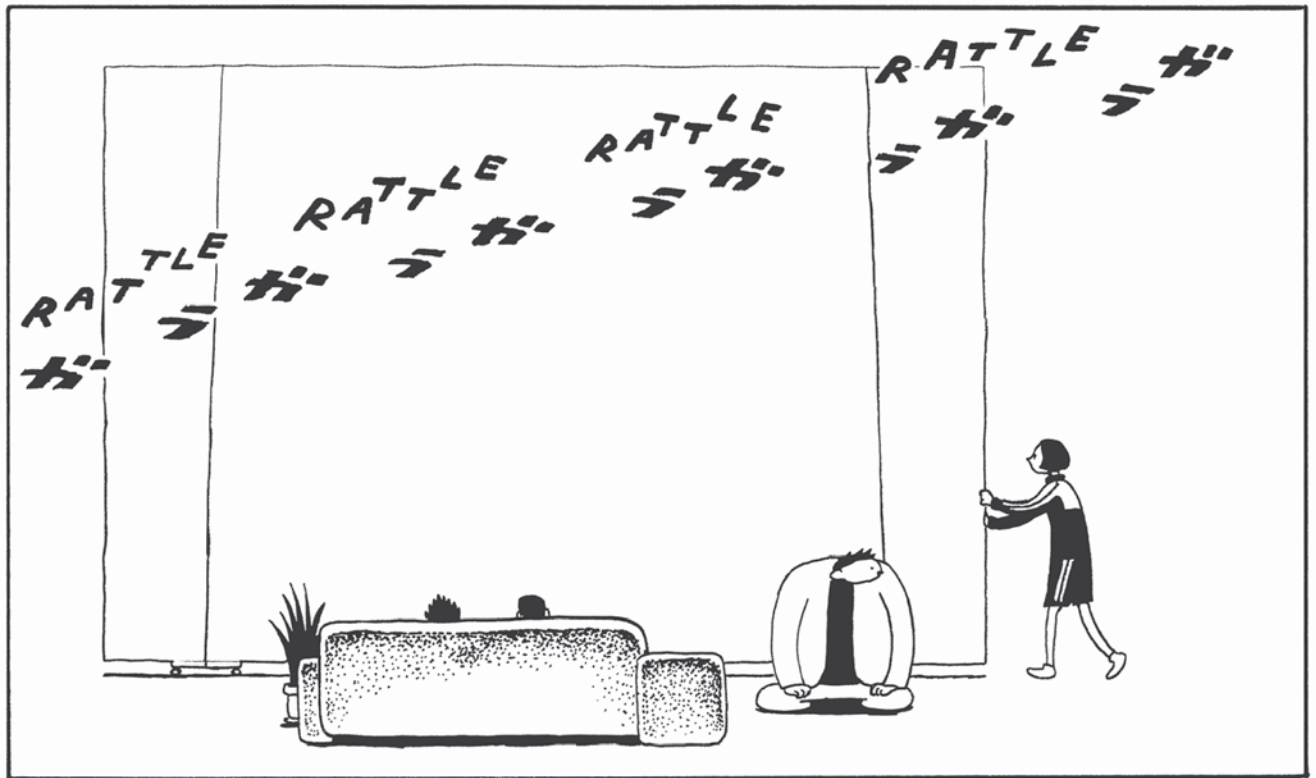
The
Invisible Woman
VS The
Master Swindler

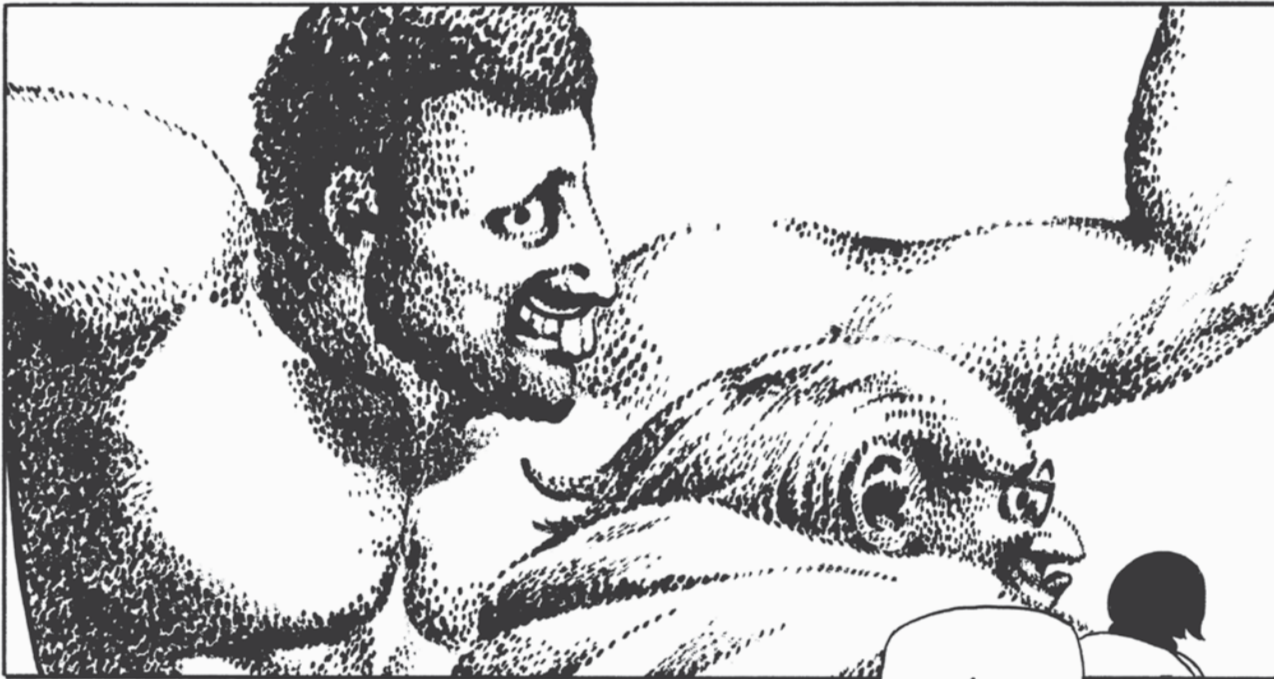
Nishimura
Tsuchika

サギ師

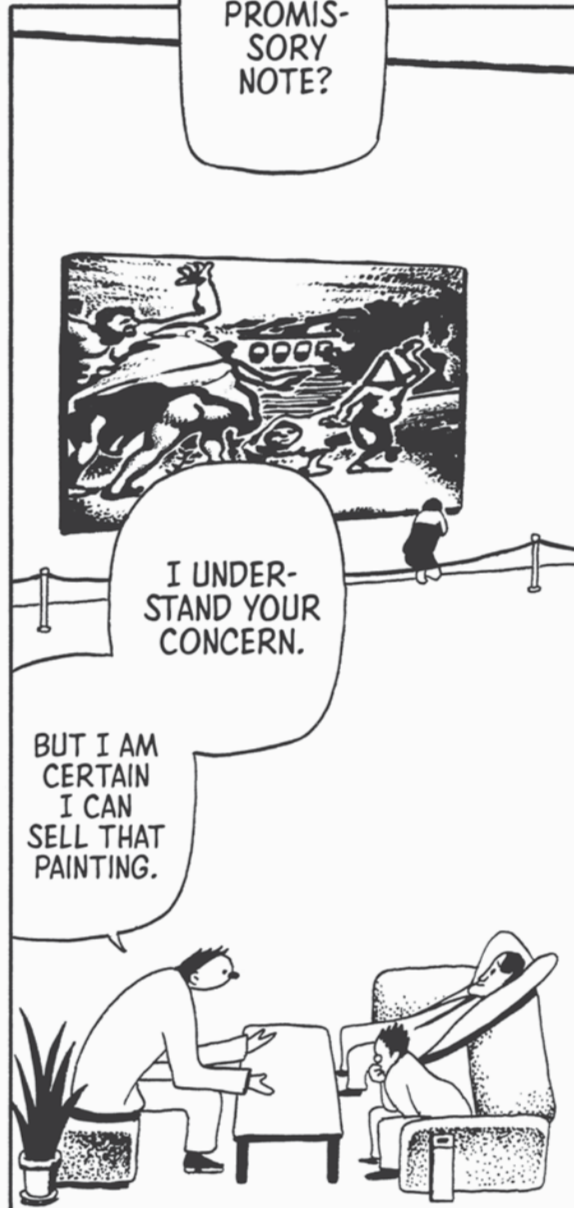
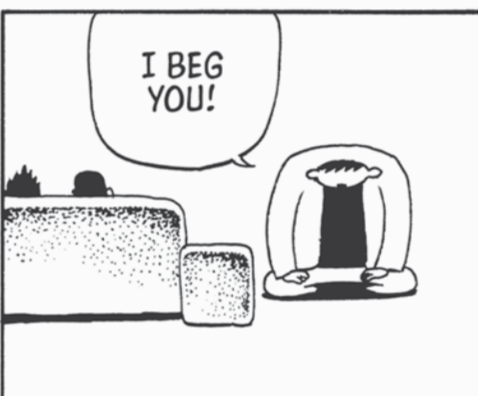
Glacier Bay - Glaeolia 3: "THE INVISIBLE WOMAN VS THE MASTER SWINDLER"

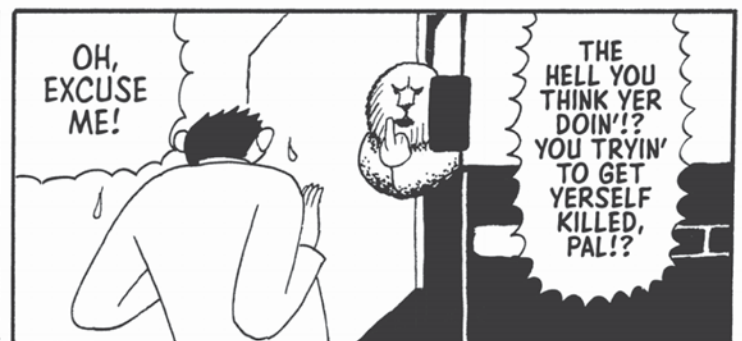
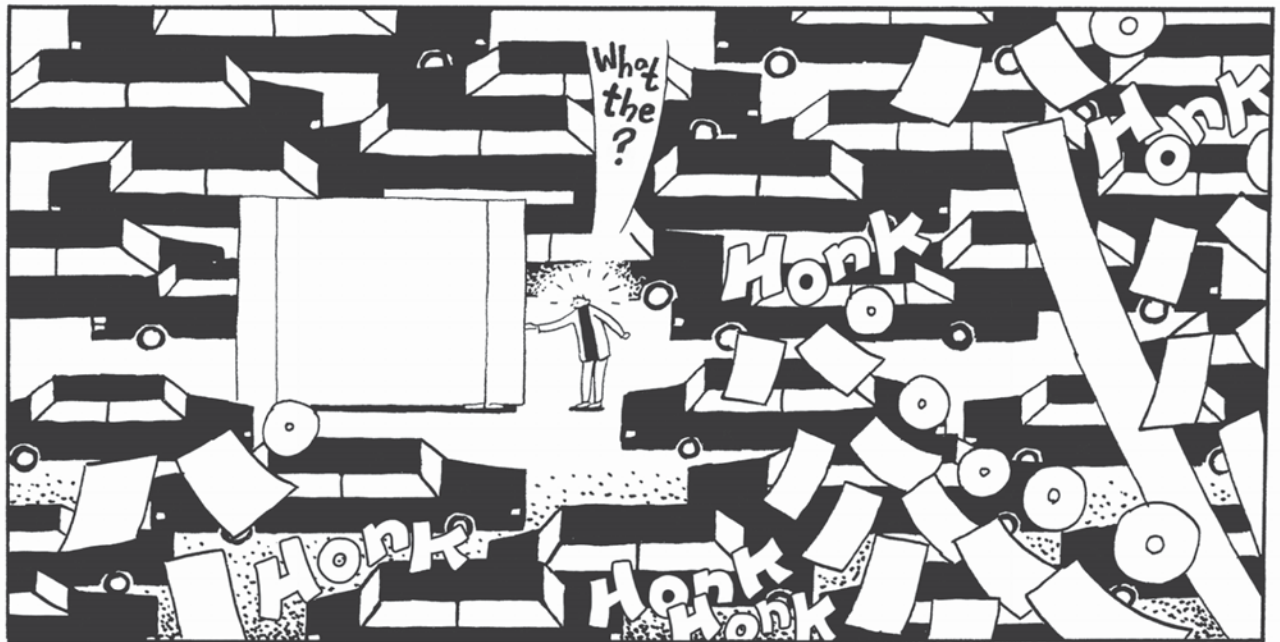
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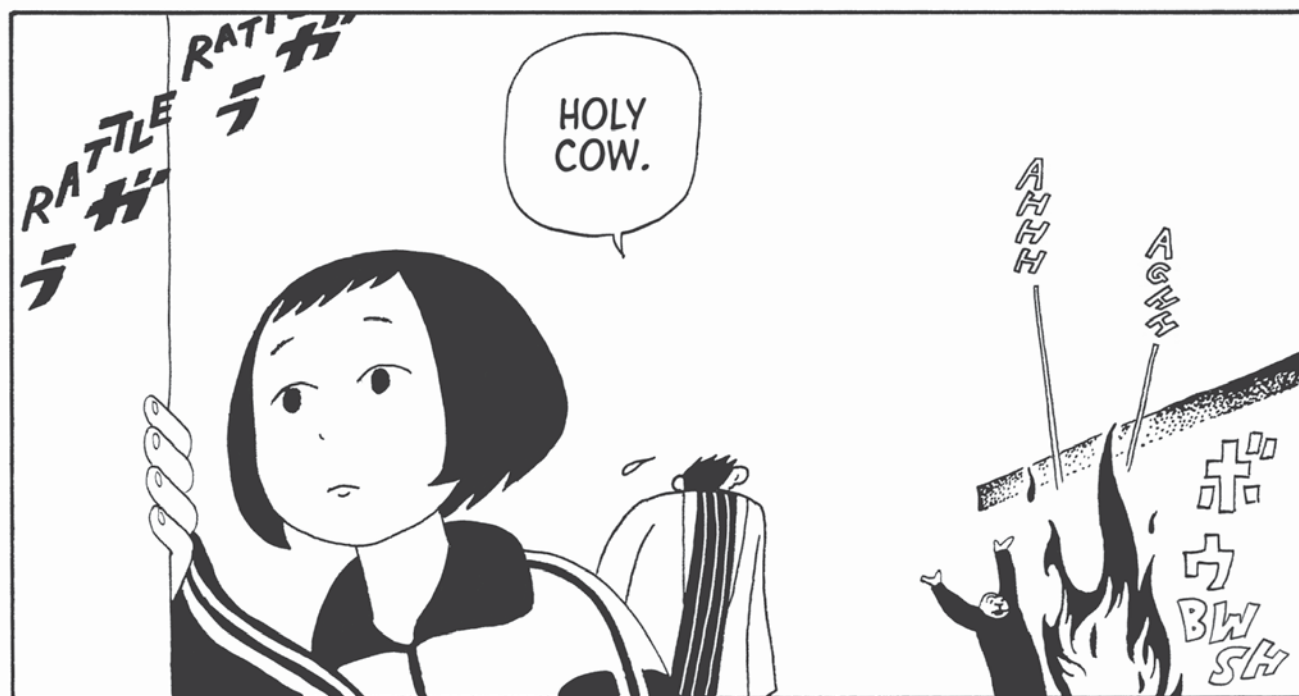
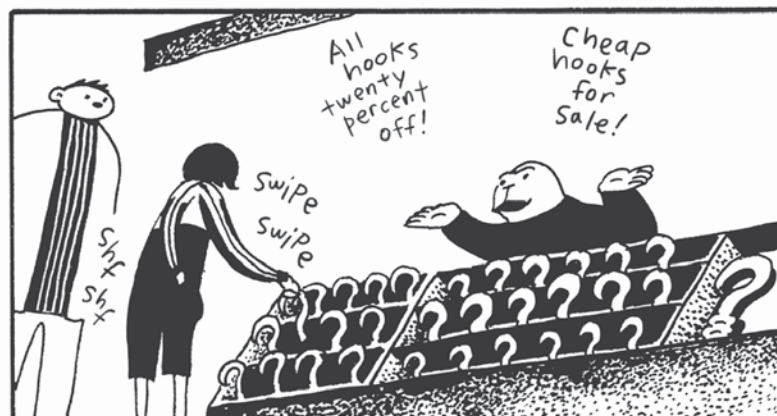
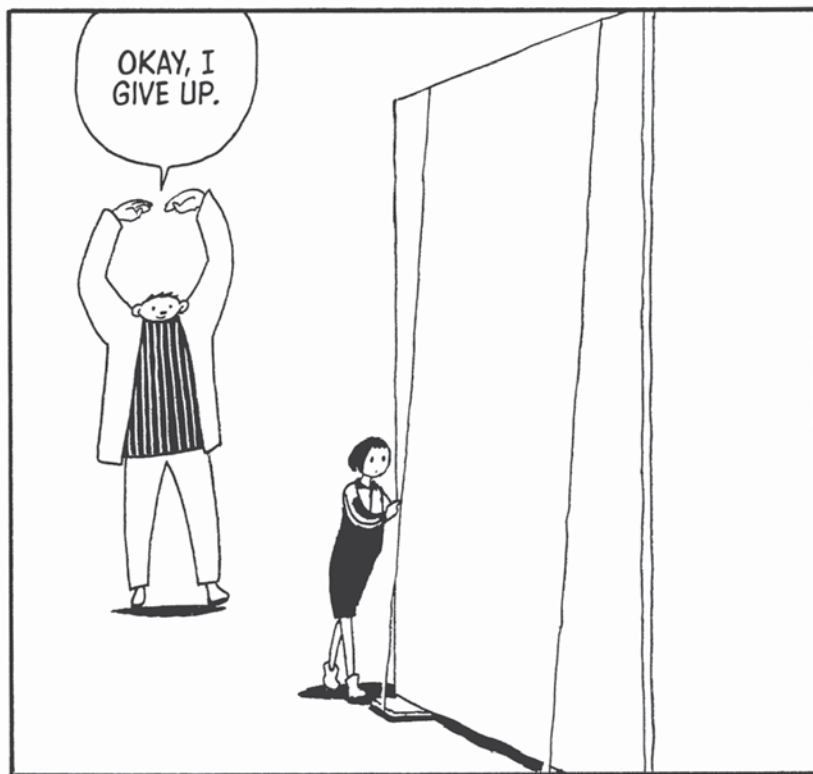
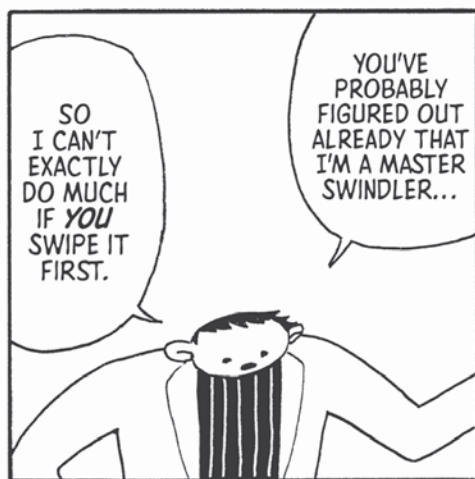


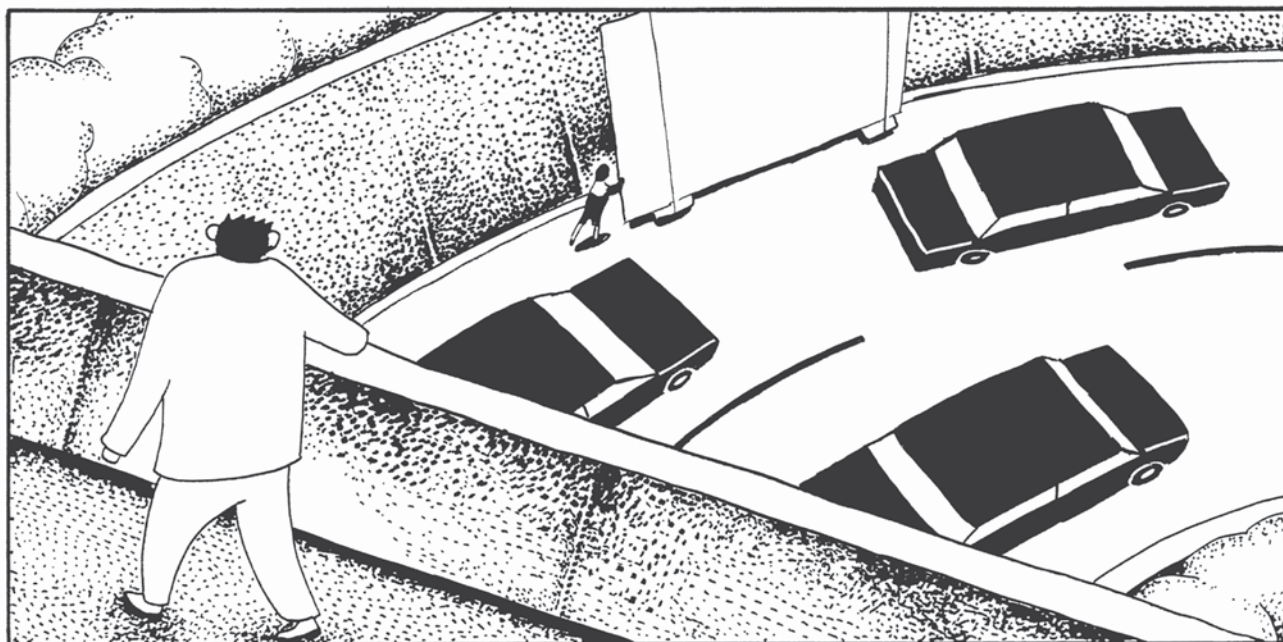
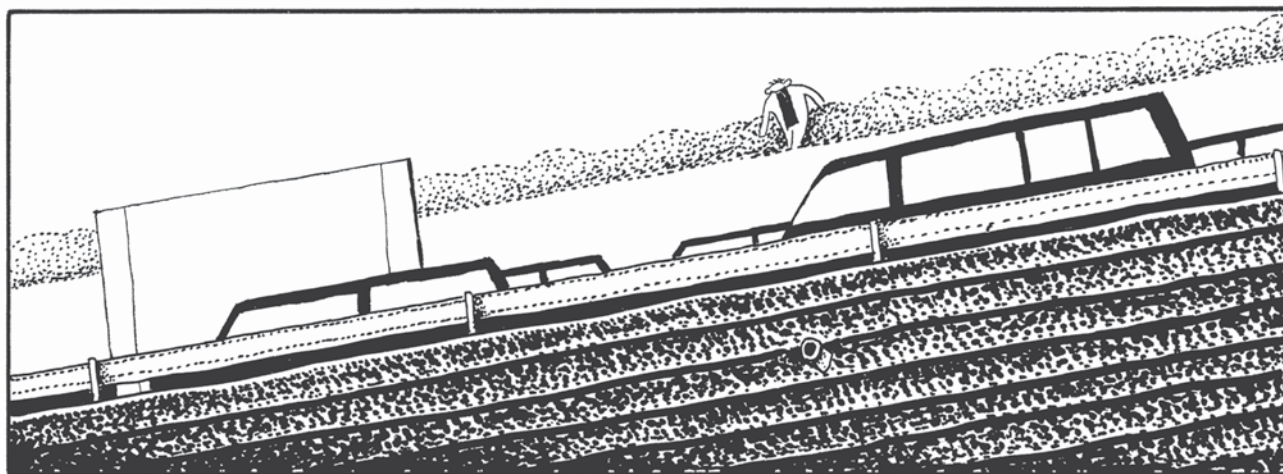
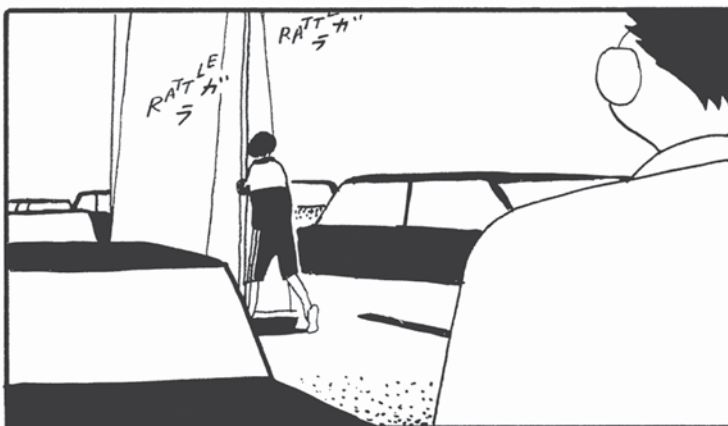
A...
PROMIS-
SORY
NOTE?





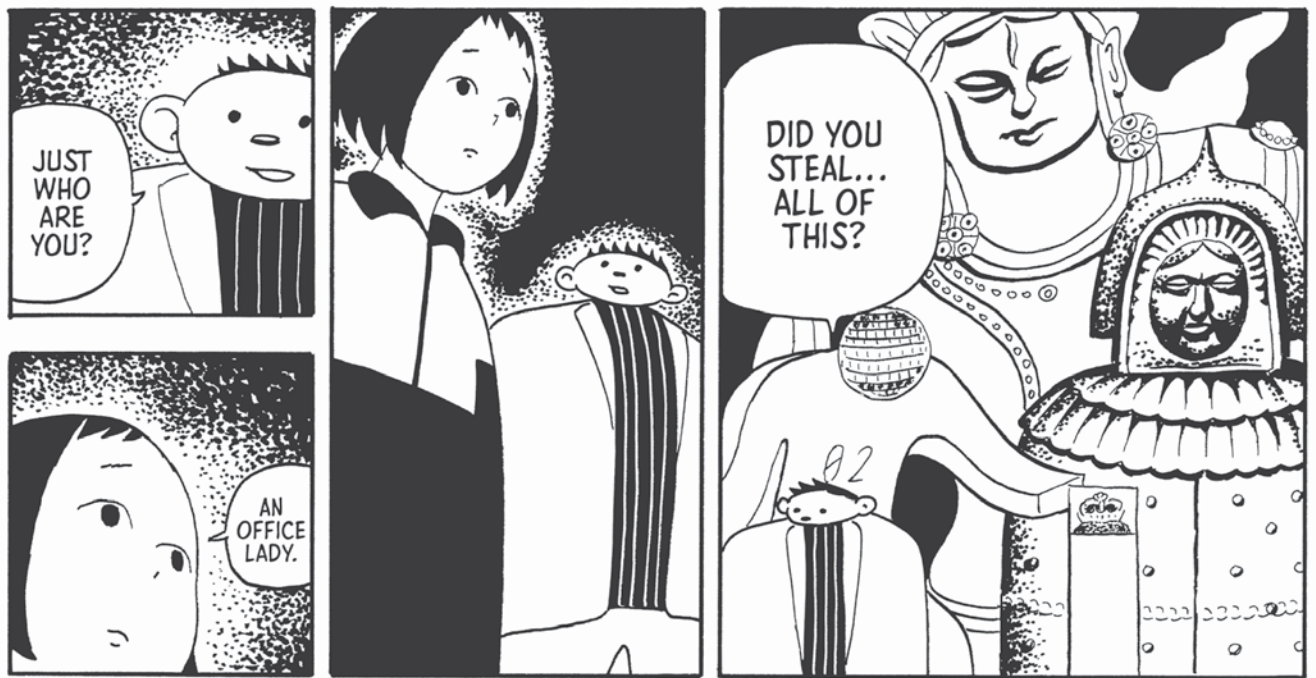


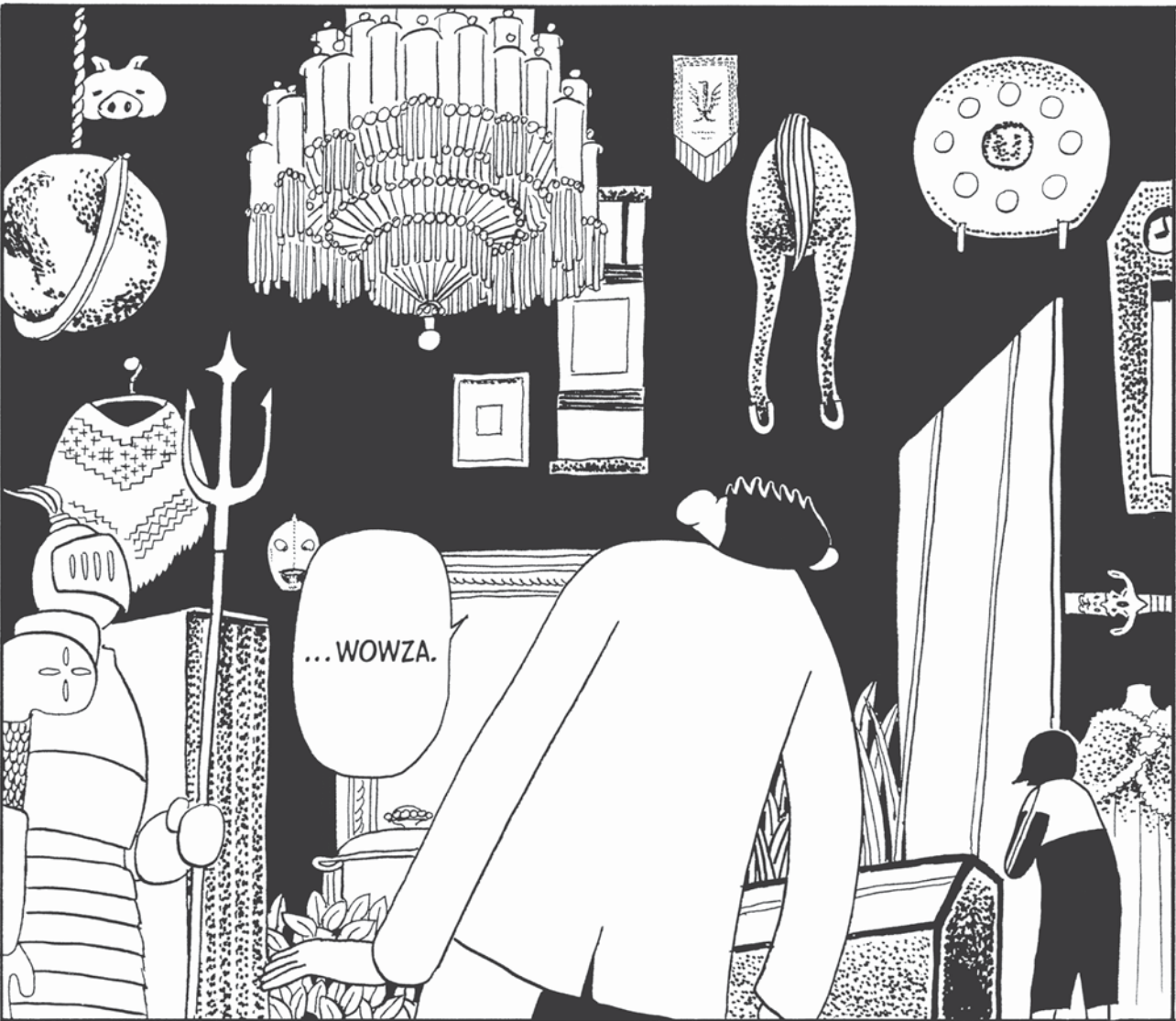
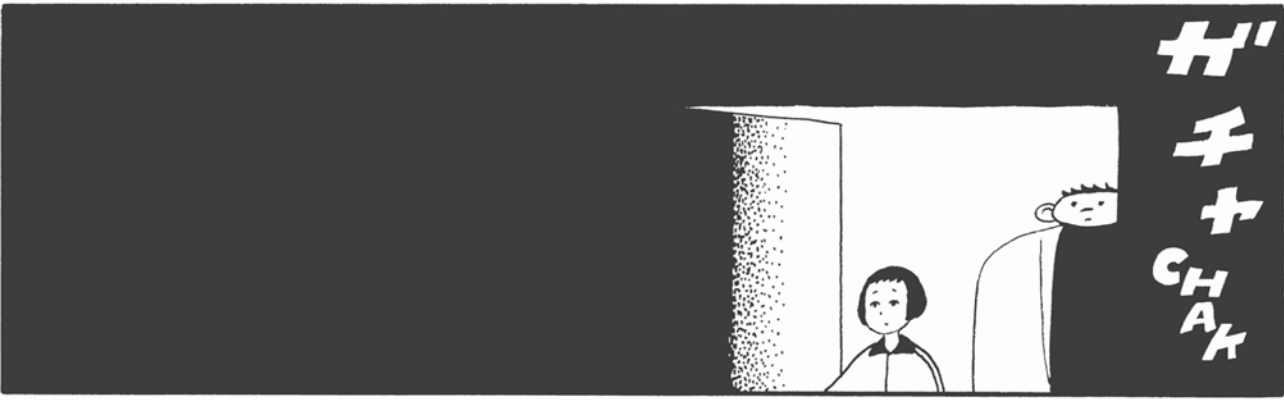




Glacier Bay - Glaeolia 3: "THE INVISIBLE WOMAN VS THE MASTER SWINDLER"

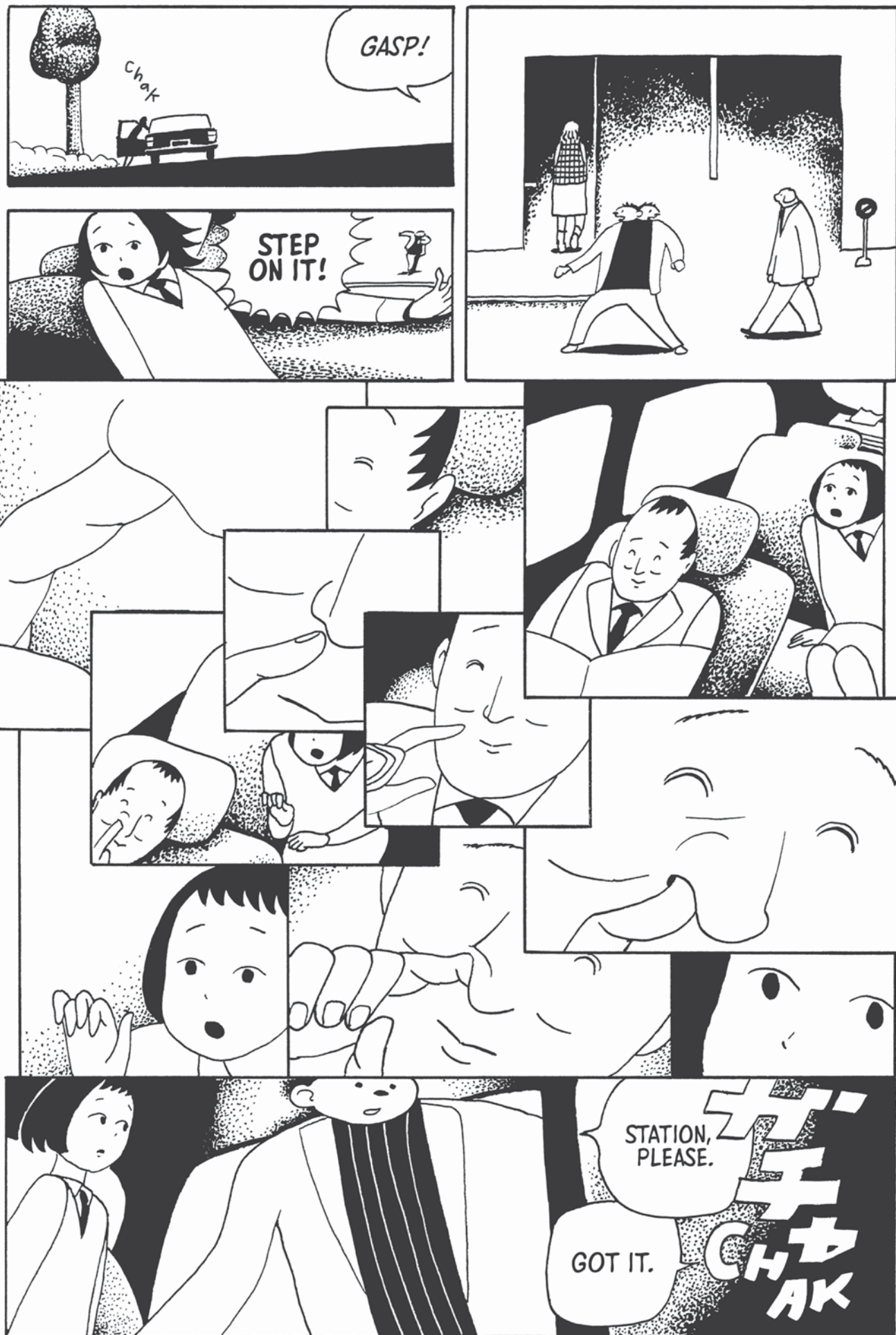
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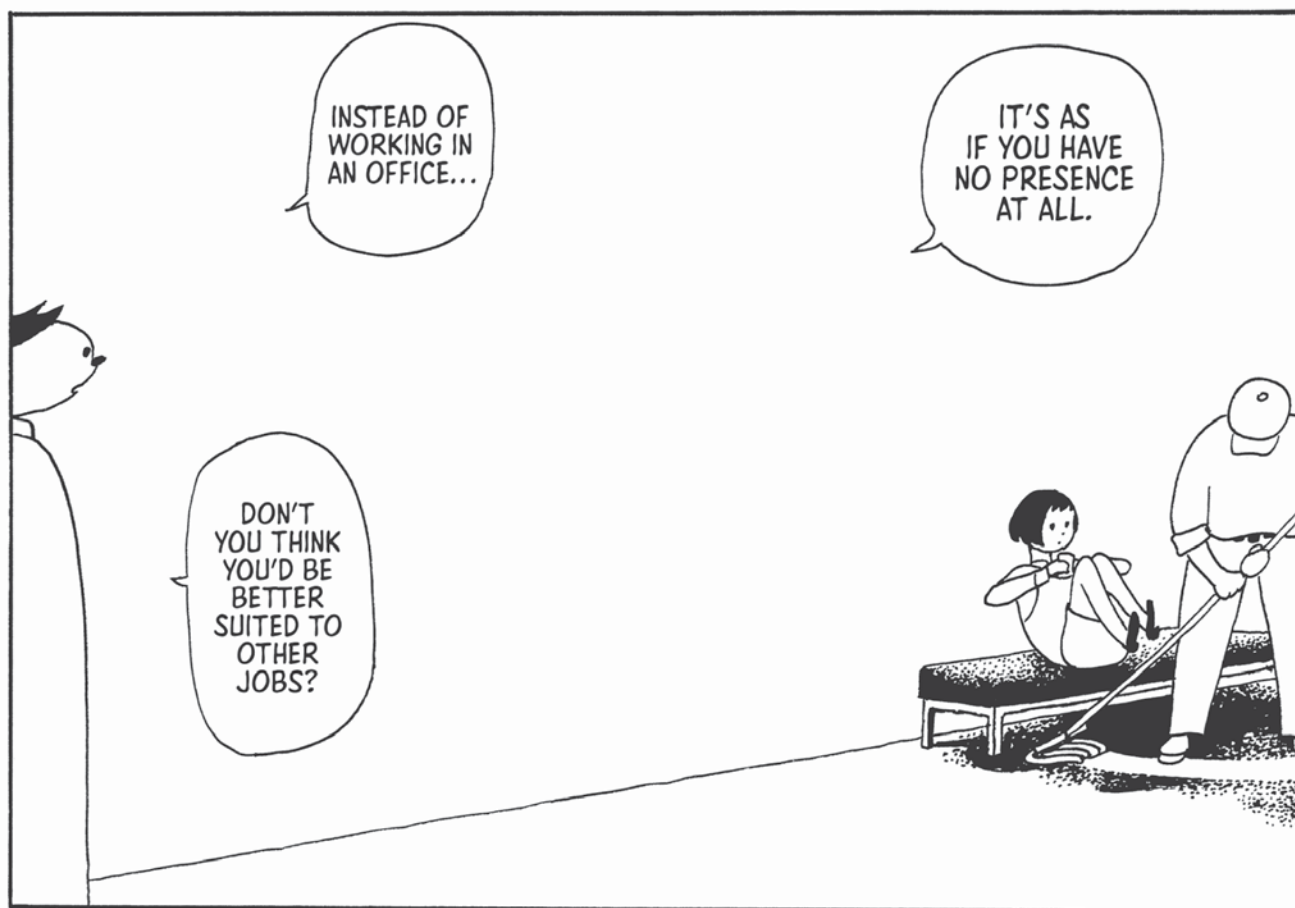
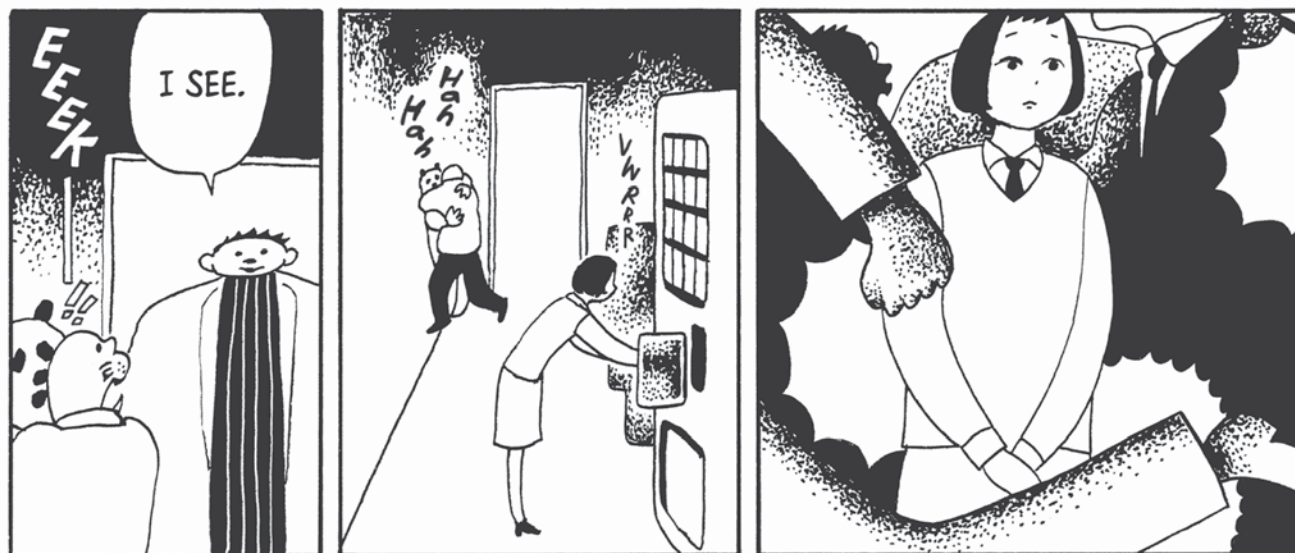




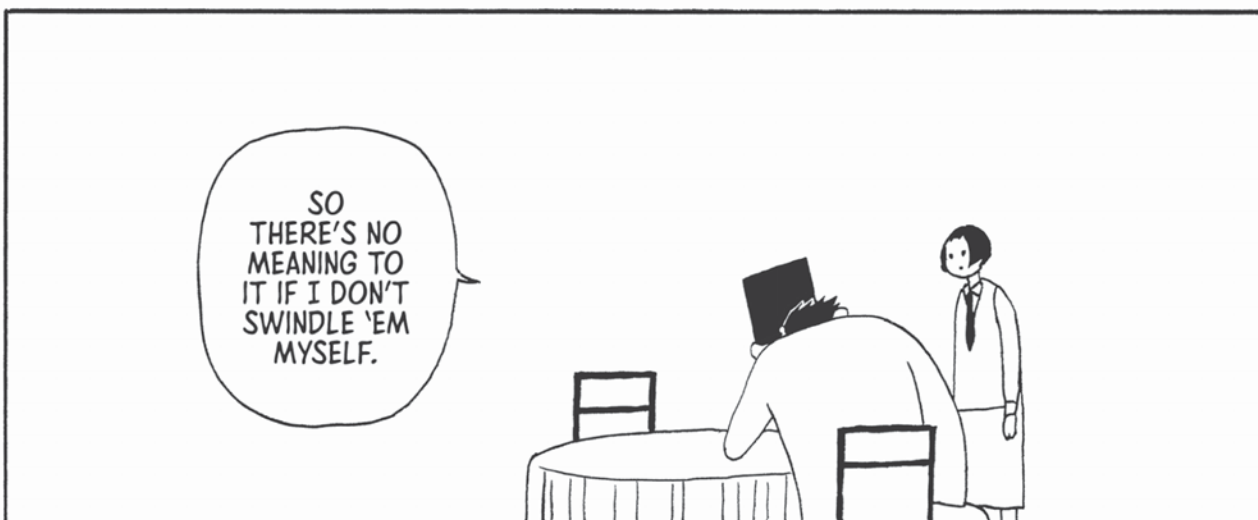
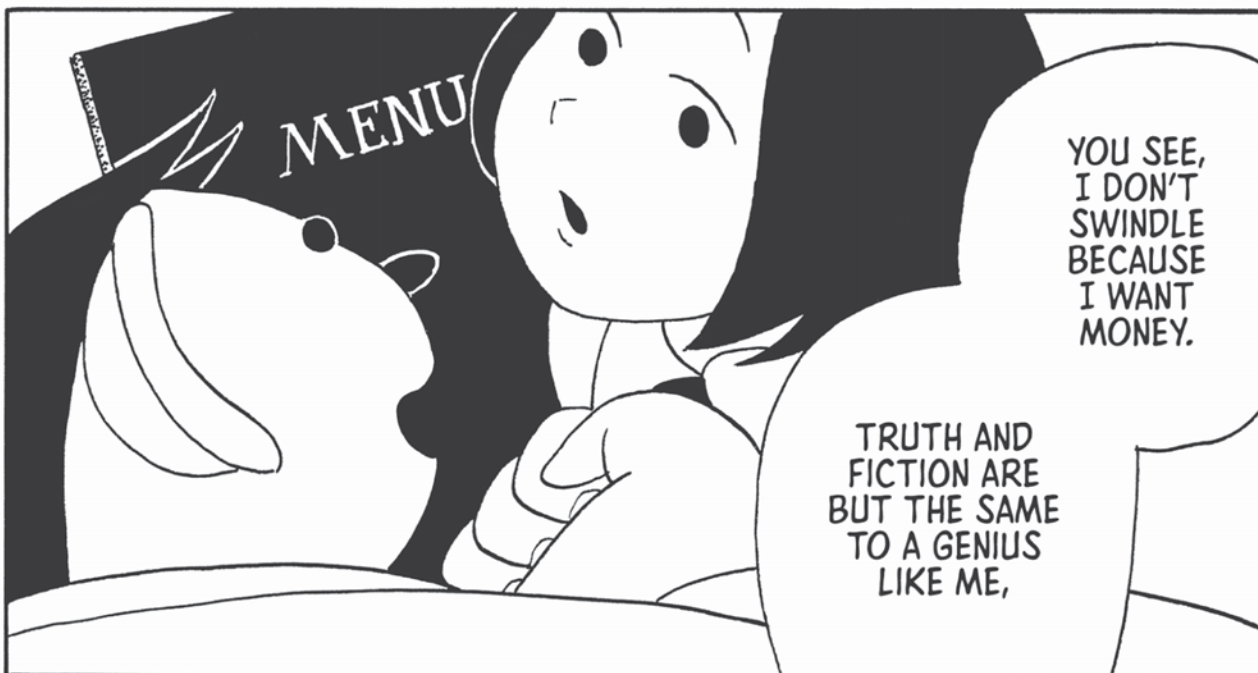
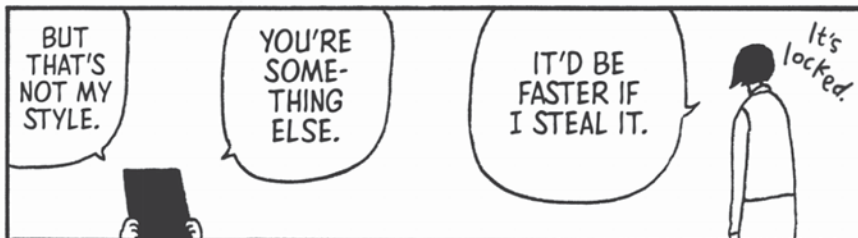
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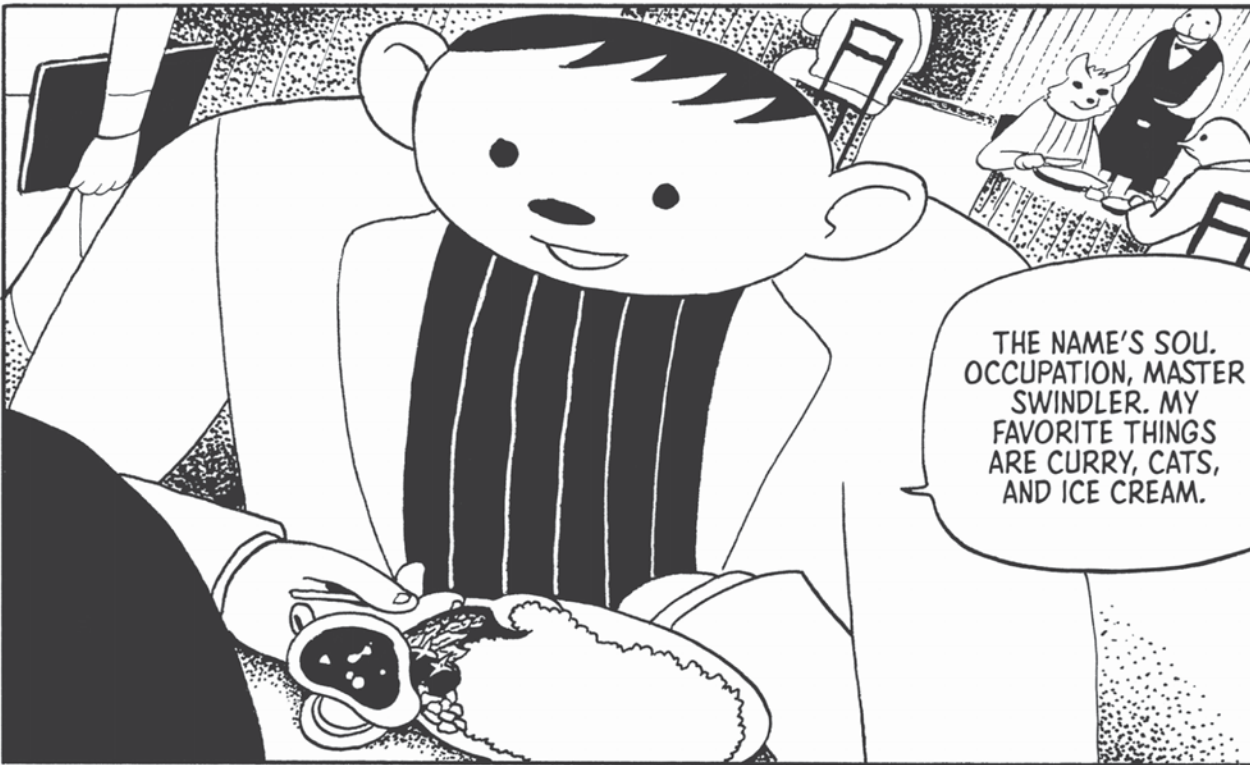
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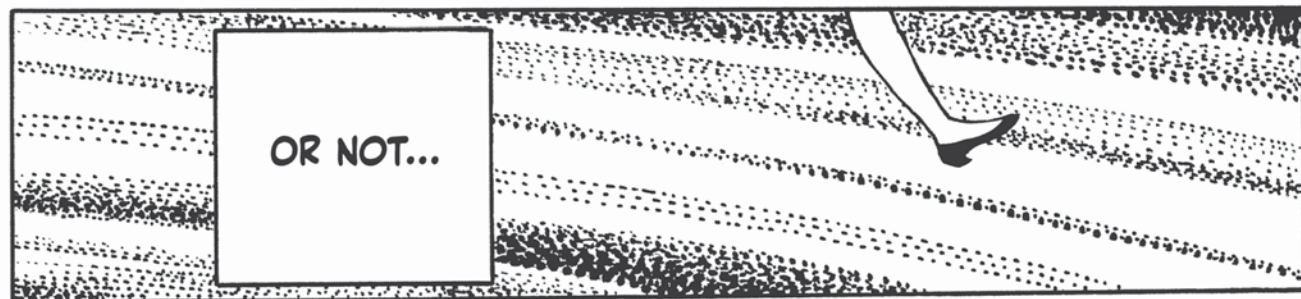
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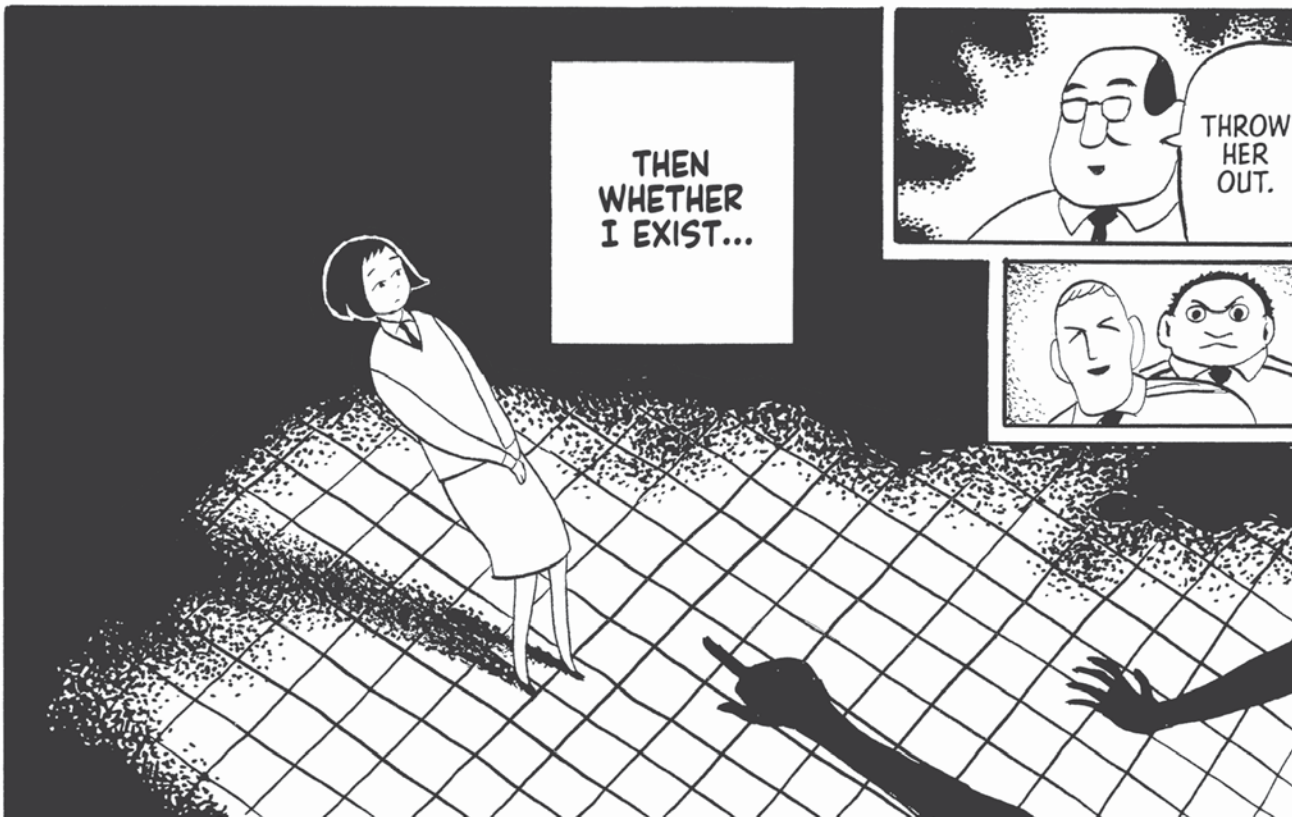
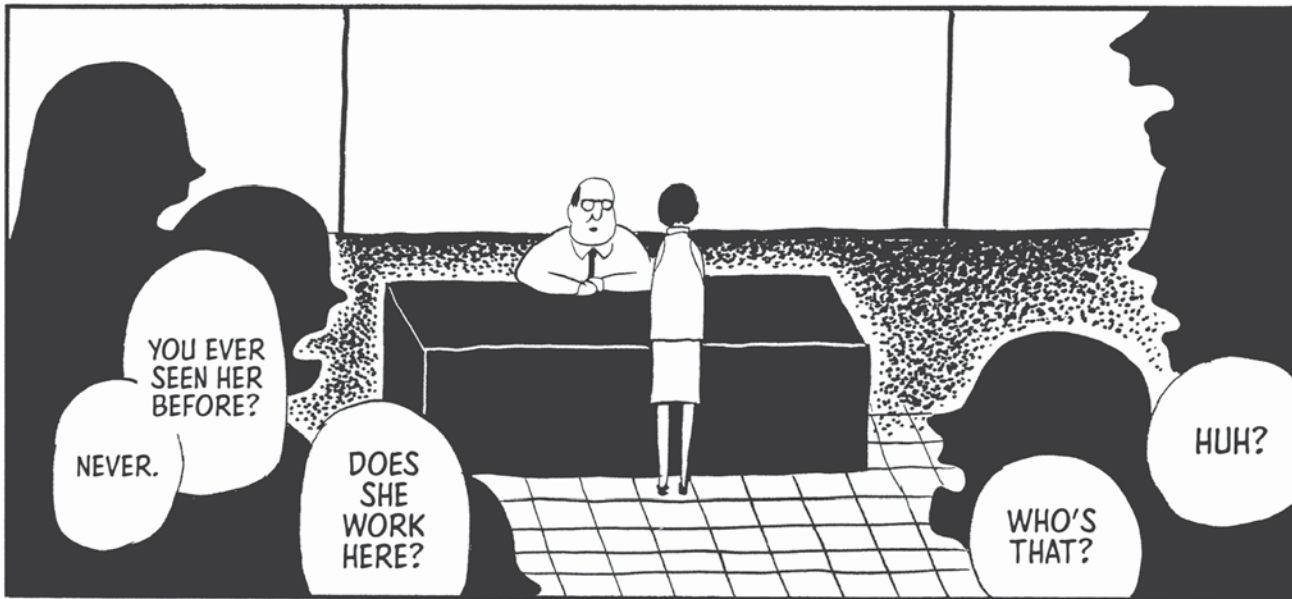


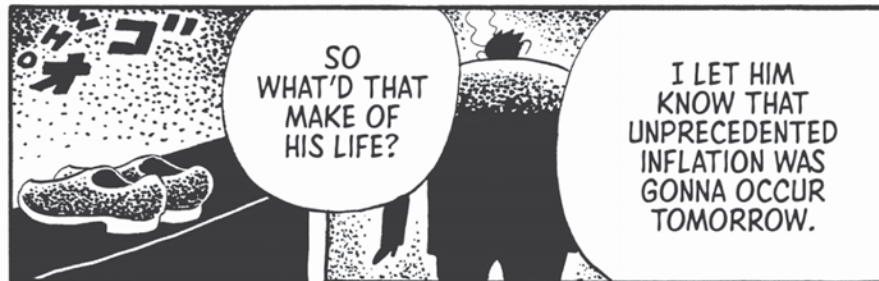
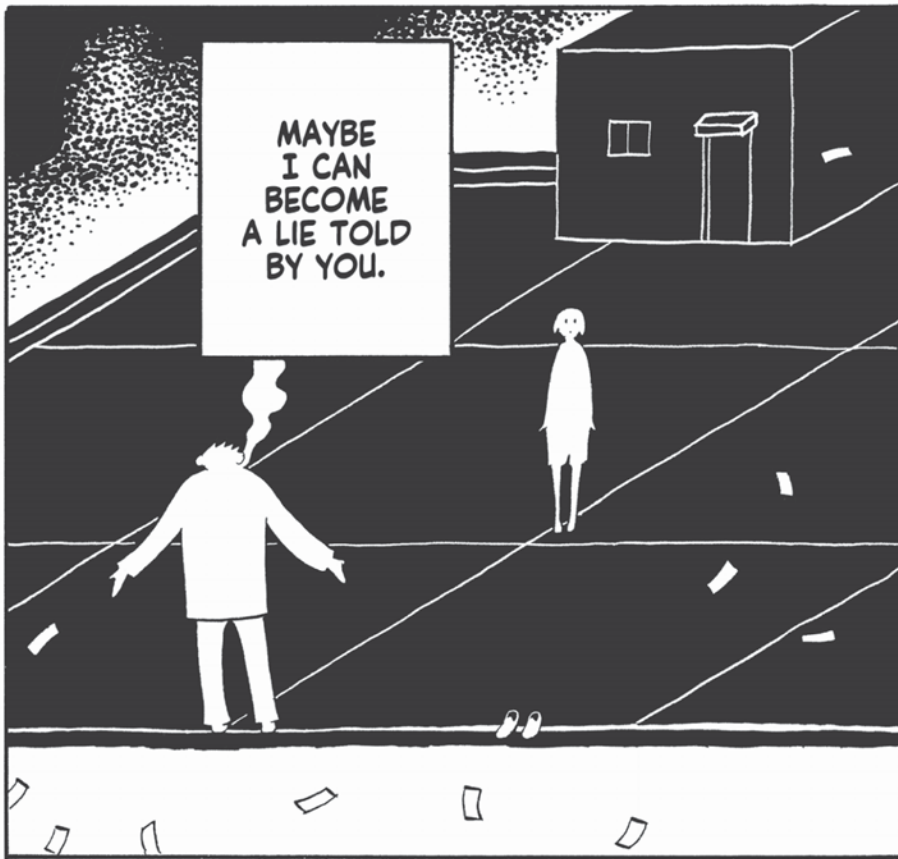


Glacier Bay - Glaeolia 3: "THE INVISIBLE WOMAN VS THE MASTER SWINDLER"

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Part 1 - END

Read more in Glaeolia 3, available now!

Viz - TO STRIP THE FLESH

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Let's get straight to the point.

ARE WE LIVE?

YEAH.

"GREAT TITS AS USUAL!"

"GIMME A PIECE OF THAT."

"BUTCHER ME TOO."

Z...

...CUT YOU ALL TO PIECES.

Chiaki Ogawa is a man.

HEY, TAKATO.

I SAID, DON'T READ THE COMMENTS.

I'M GONNA...

Whoa!

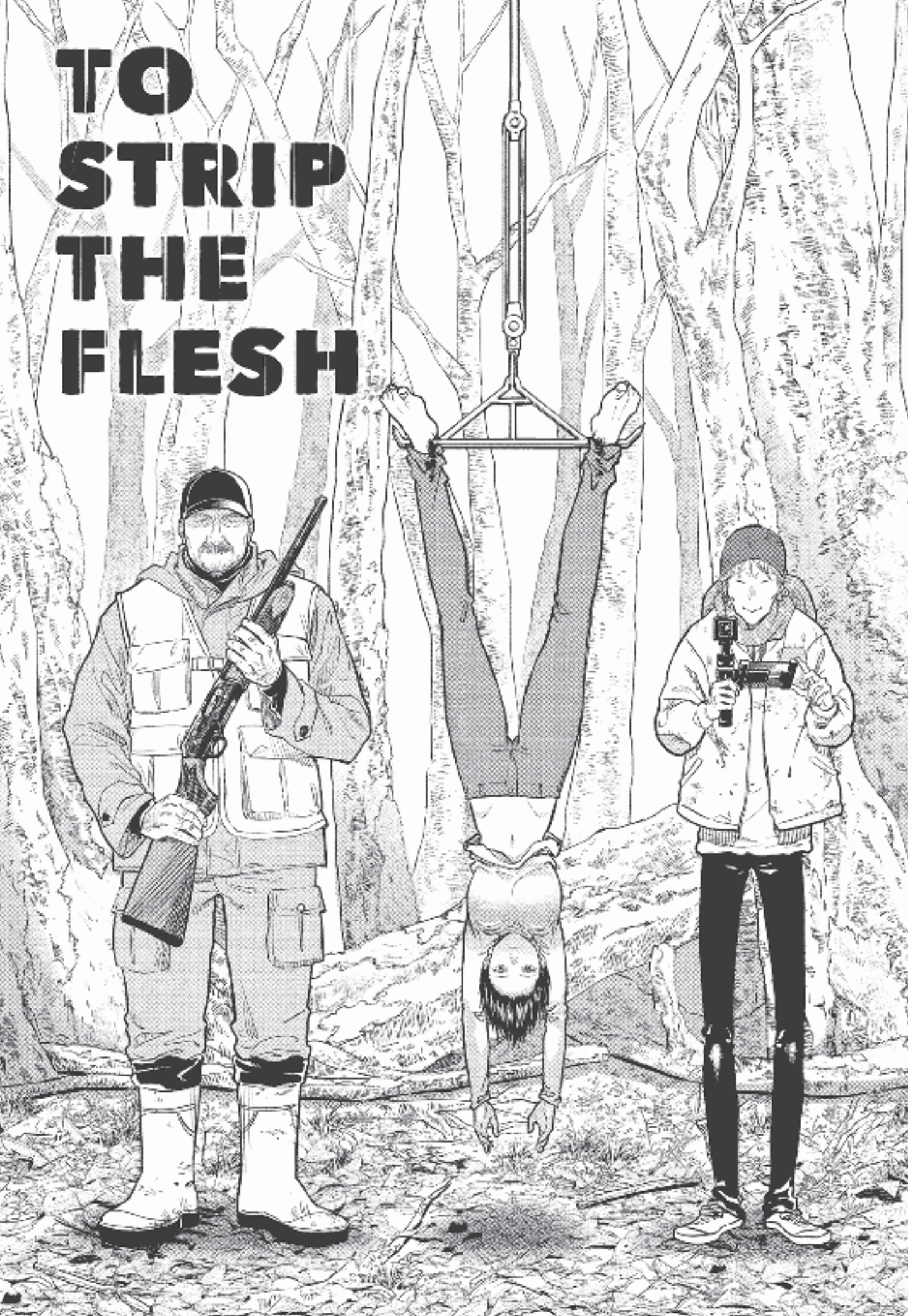
THAT'S IT



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TO STRIP THE FLESH





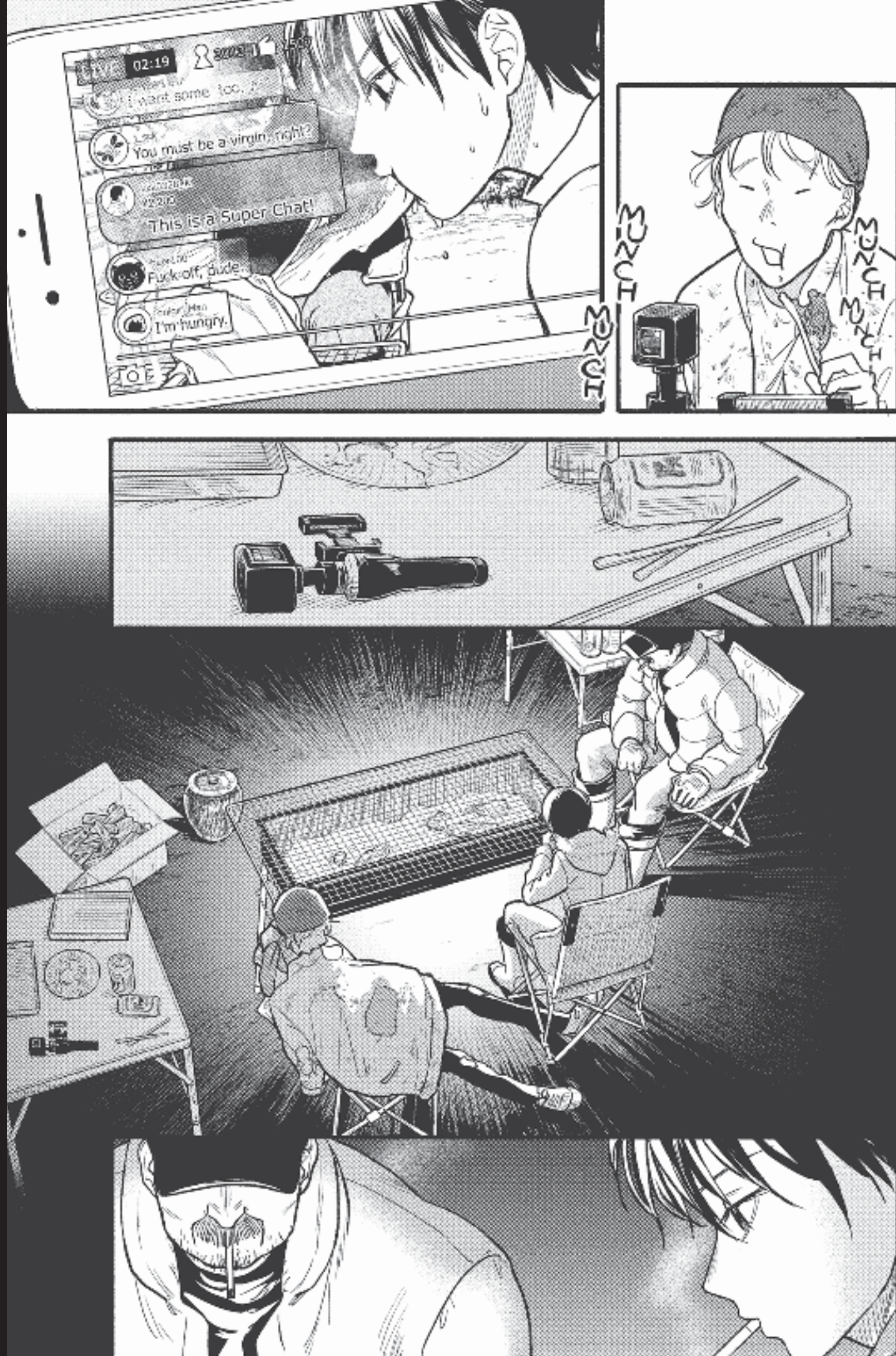
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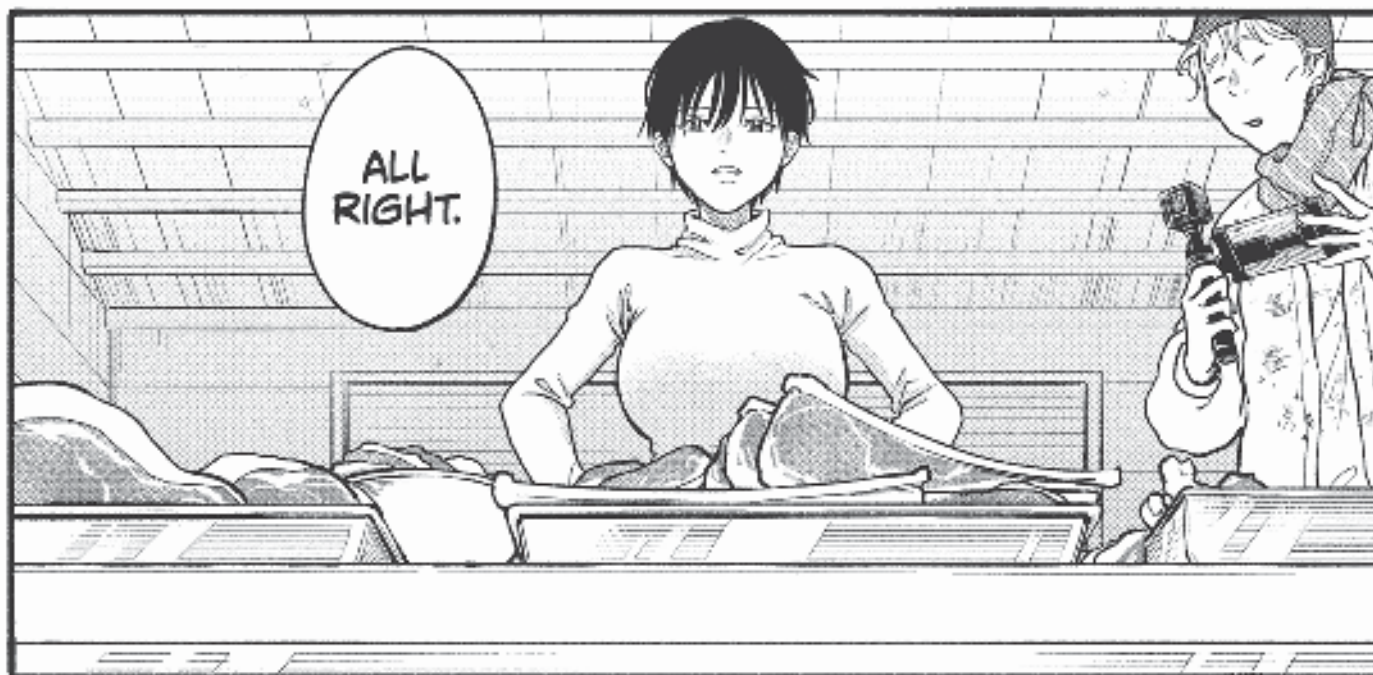
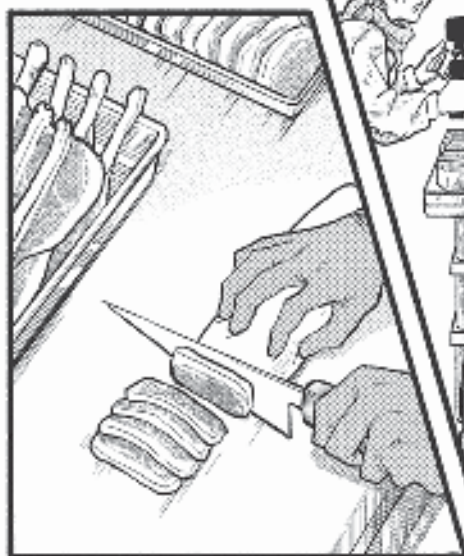
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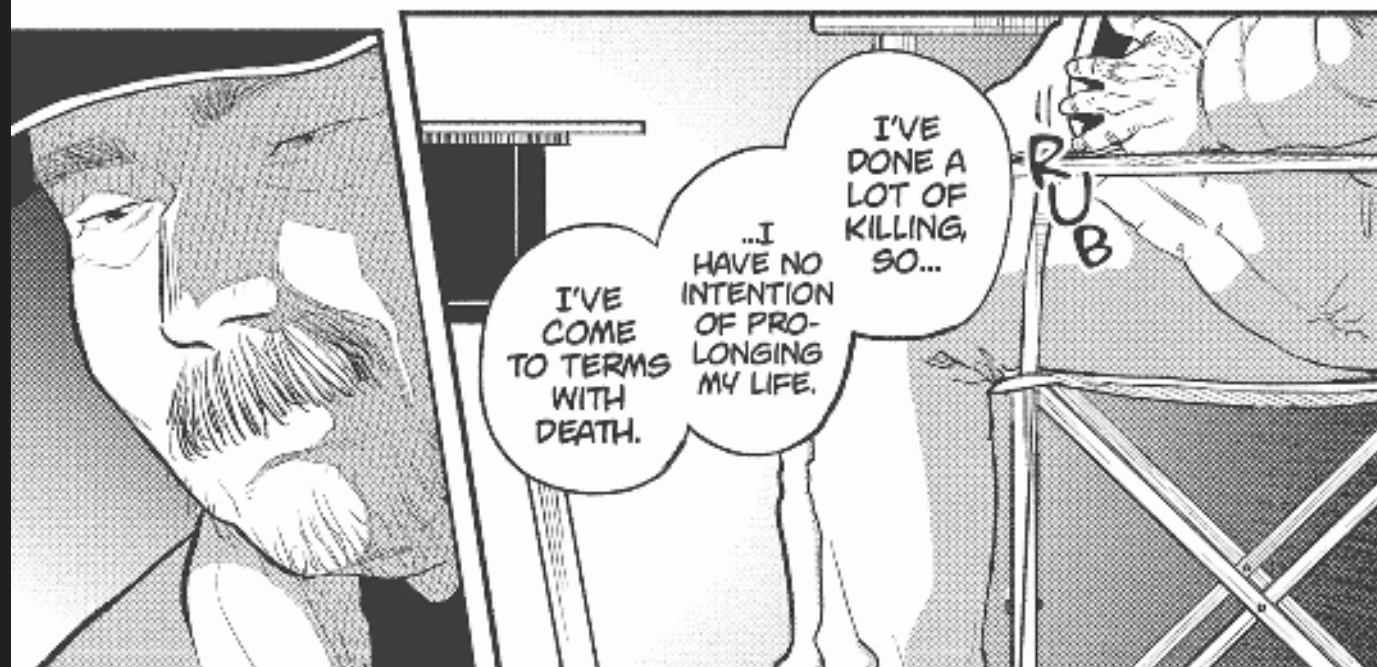
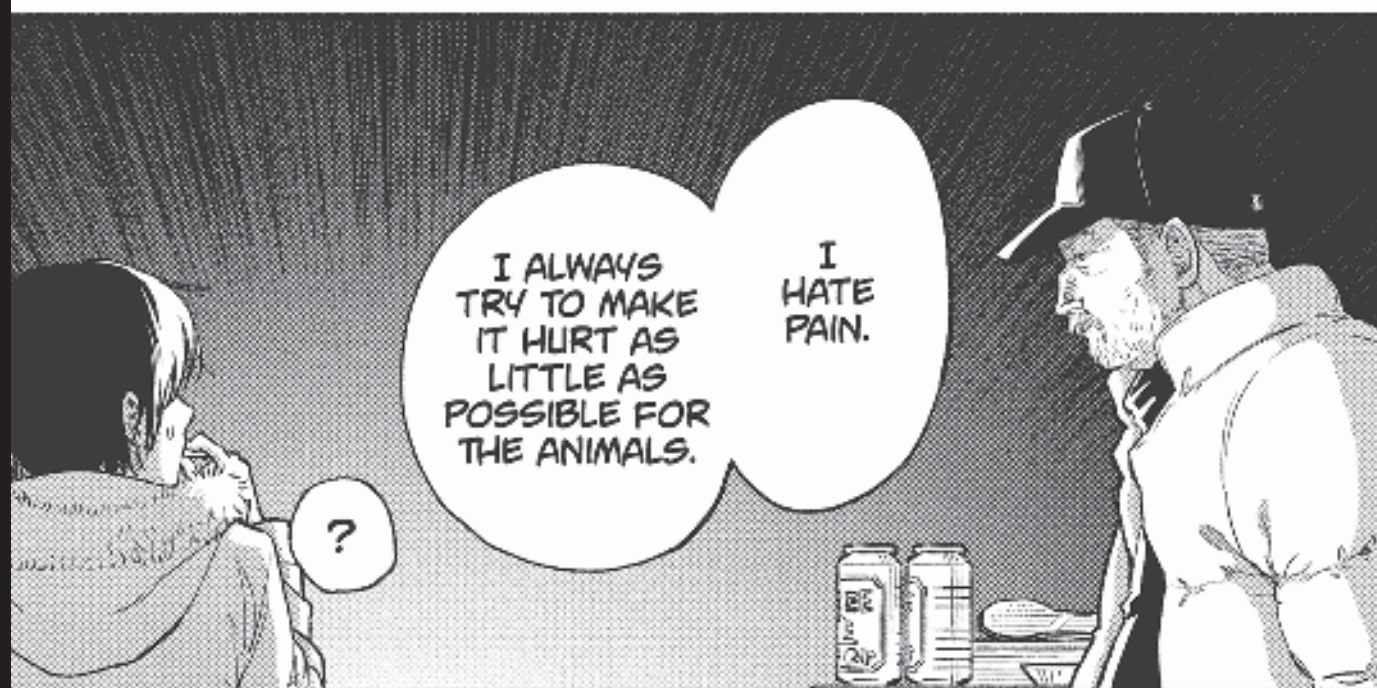
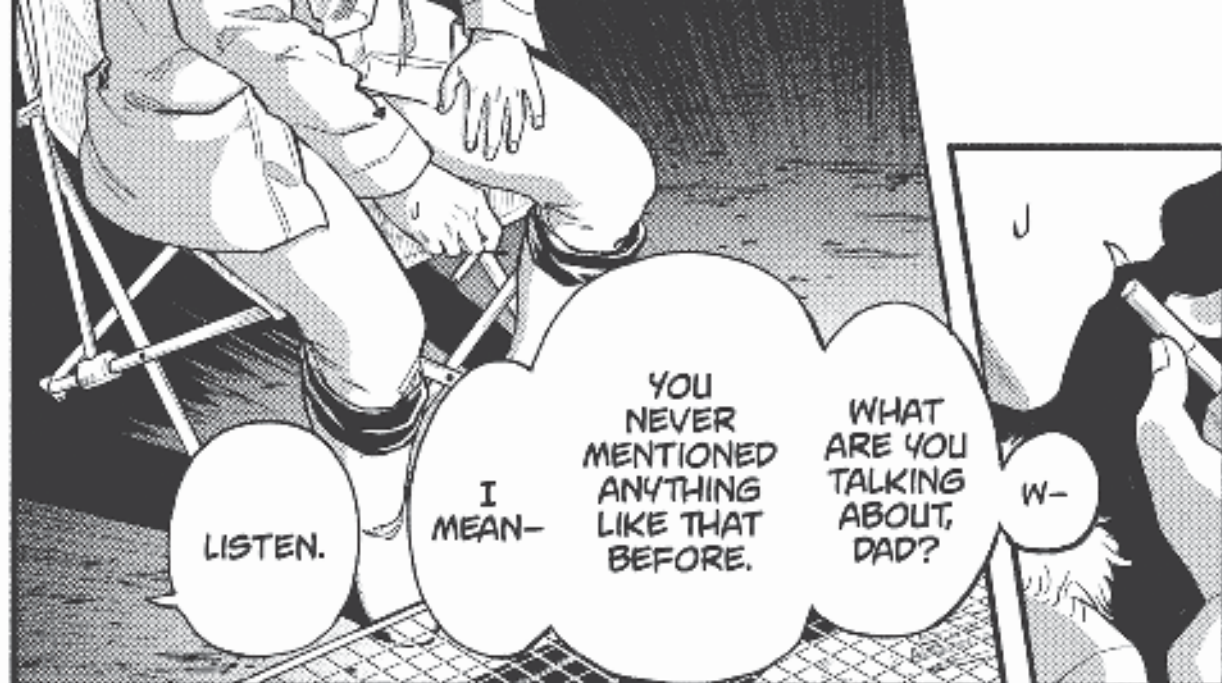


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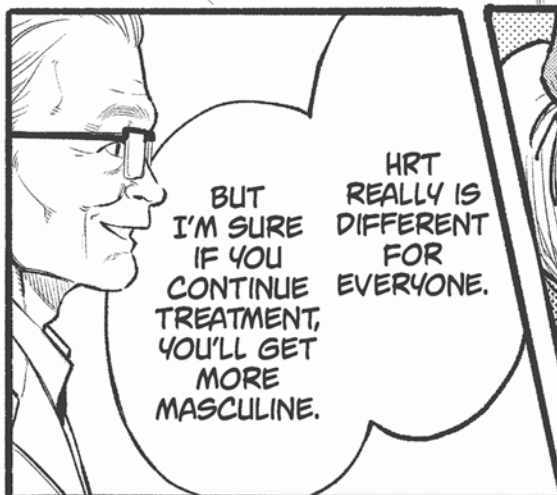
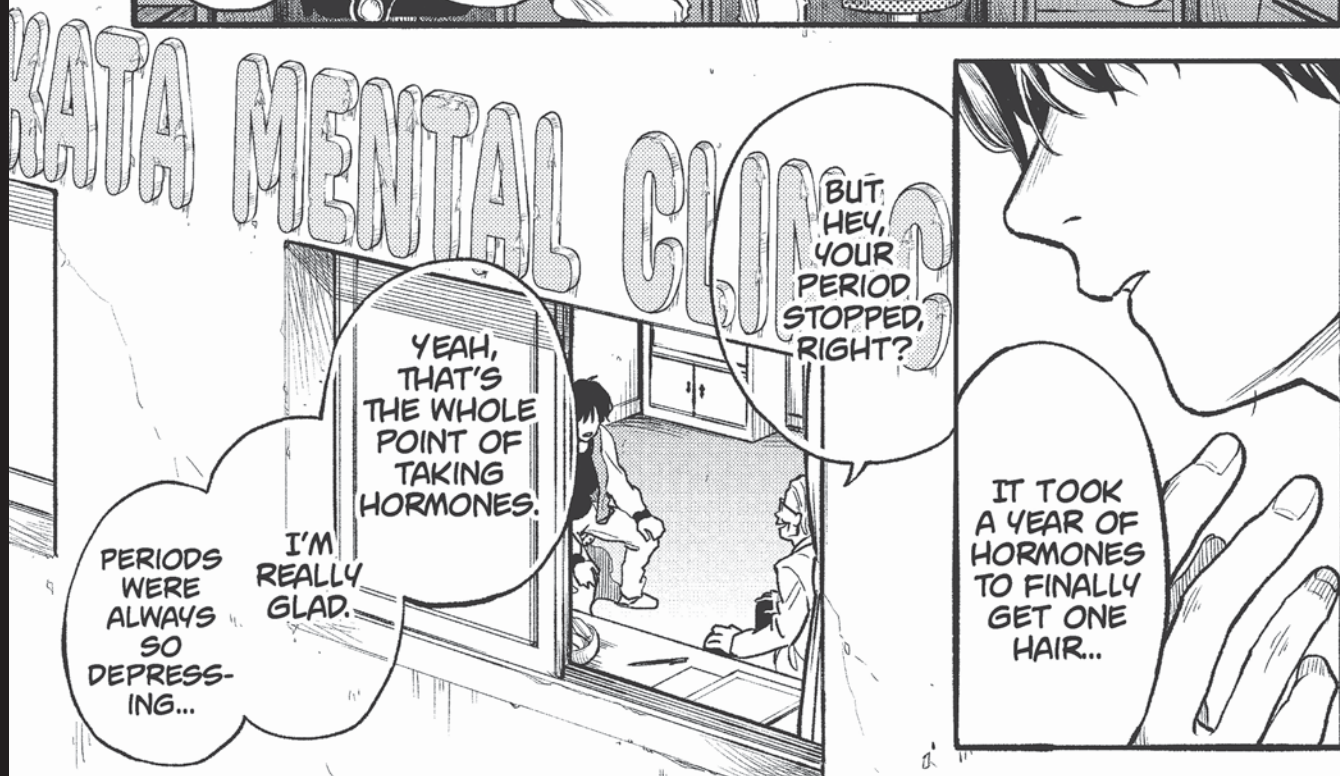
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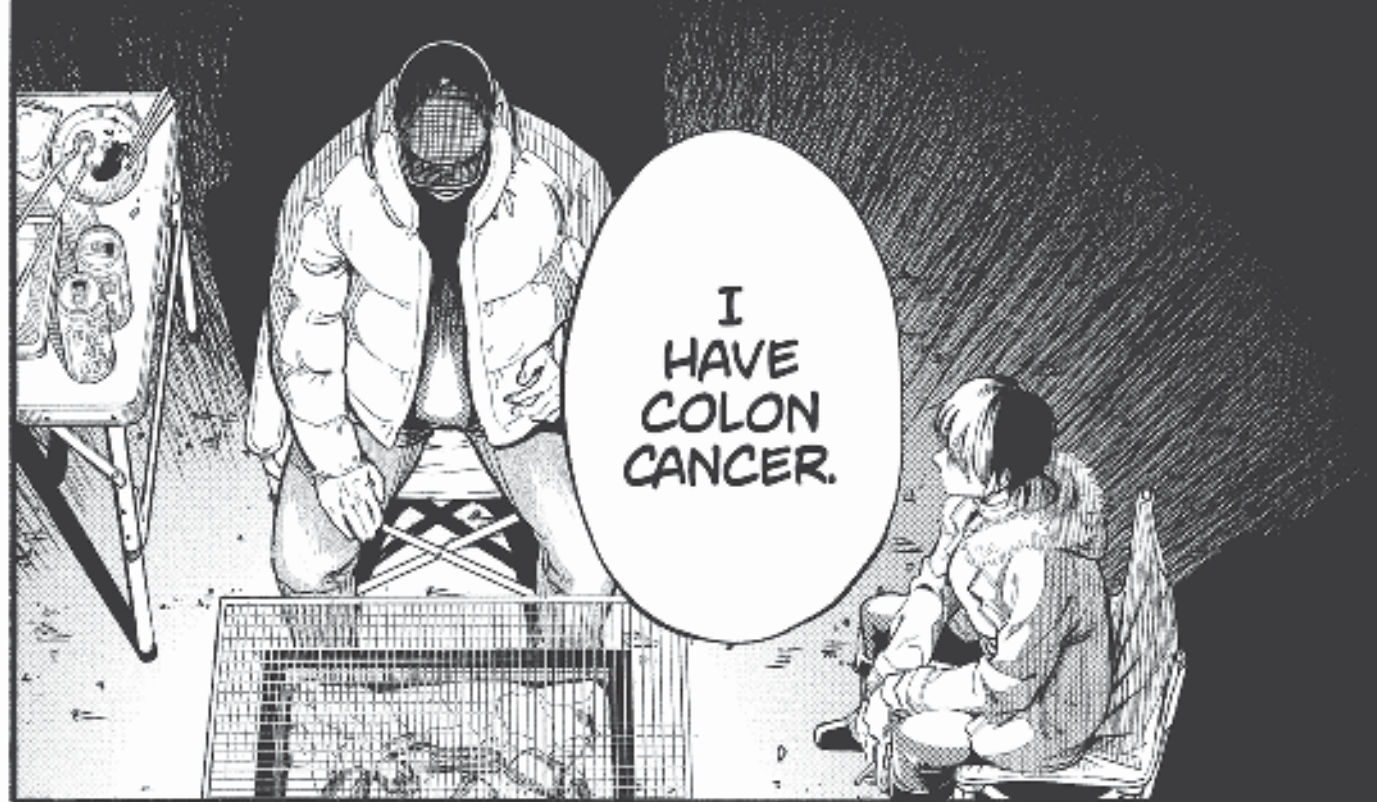














WHAT
ARE YOUR
THOUGHTS
ABOUT
SRS?

IF YOU
WANT TO GO
TO THAILAND
FOR THE
OPERATION,
I'LL DRAW
UP THE
PAPERWORK
IN ENGLISH.

YOU
FULFILL
ALL THE
CRITERIA.

YOU
HAVE
THE GID
DIAGNOSIS.



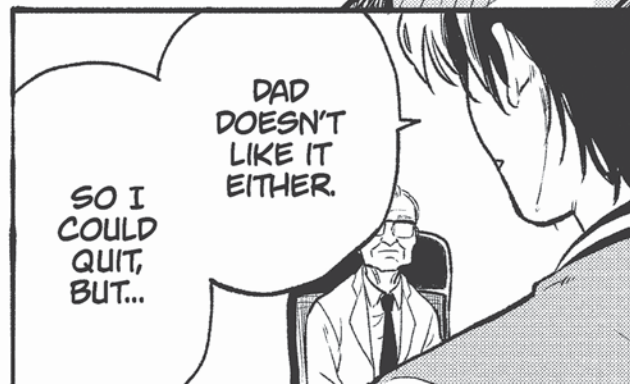
HUH?

I...

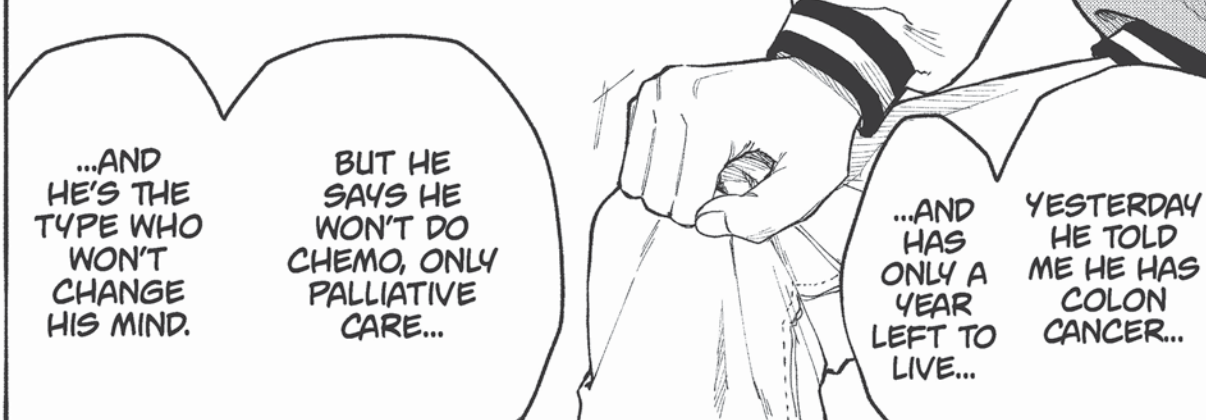
BUT
WHEN
I THINK
ABOUT
HOW HE'LL
BE GONE
SOON...

MY
THOUGHTS
HAVEN'T
CHANGED.
I'D DO IT
RIGHT NOW
IF I COULD...

...BUT
I JUST
CAN'T
WHILE
DAD IS
ALIVE.

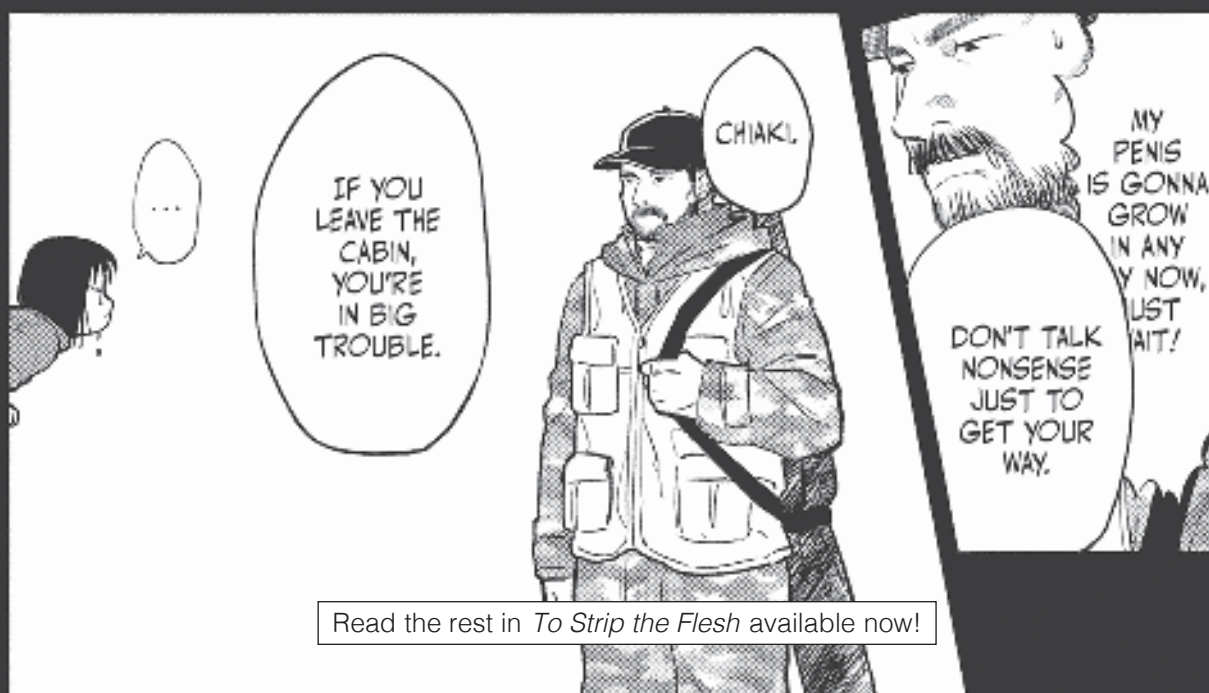
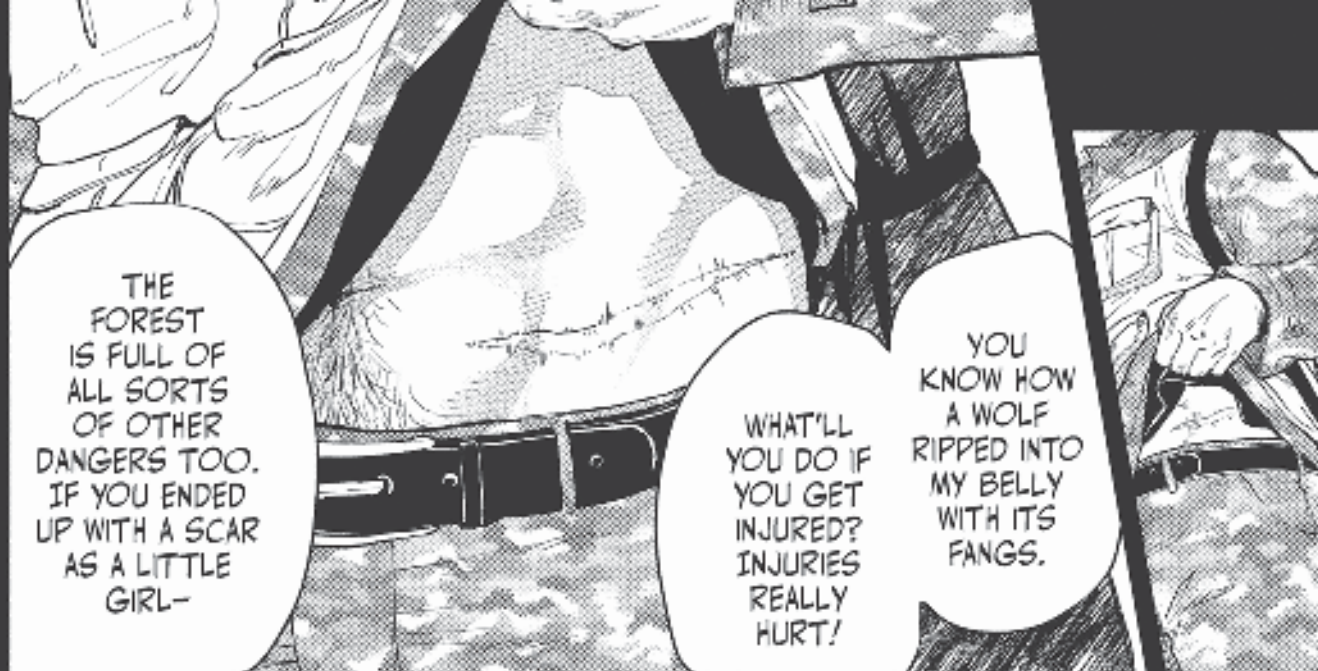






Viz - TO STRIP THE FLESH

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Read the rest in *To Strip the Flesh* available now!

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Some of our advertisers sent us samples of their cool stuff to give away to lucky OTAKU USA readers! But guess what? There's not enough for everyone. So, we're going to draw names out of a hat, and send the goodies to a few lucky otaku!

HERE'S HOW TO ENTER: Just go to www.otakuusamagazine.com, click on "giveaway," and type your name, address and phone number and/or e-mail address and click on "submit." Or, if snail mail's your preference, write your name, address, phone number and/or email address on a postcard or sheet of paper and mail it to: OTAKU Giveaway (October 2022), 2406 Reach Road, Williamsport, PA 17701. If your name is chosen, we'll contact you, or just send you the item!

Rules, Rules, Rules. The official rules are on page 93.

Viz Media

Megalobox, Season 1 - Limited Edition (1 winner)

Bored, resigned, and unfulfilled, a young man with neither name nor past survives by fighting in underground matches of a sport called "Megalobox," a form of boxing that utilizes powered exoskeletons. Calling himself JNK.DOG, he feels trapped in a world of crime, poverty, and ecological collapse. All that changes when he has a chance encounter with Yuri, the reigning king of Megalobox. Now, obsessed with proving himself, JNK.DOG becomes a man driven to do whatever it takes to fight his way to the top of the rankings and take on the champion. This set includes 13 episodes presented in 1080p / 16:9, English and Japanese Stereo Audio w/ English Subtitles.

Extra Features: 128 page Booklet, Megalobox Audio Drama, Interview w/ Japanese Production Staff, Interview w/ English Cast, Clean Opening and Ending, Trailers and Art Gallery.

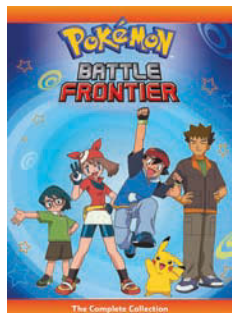


JoJo's Bizarre Adventure, Set 5, Diamond is Unbreakable, Part 2 - Limited Edition (2 winners)

A killer is on the loose in the town of Morioh, and all he wants is peace and tranquility. The culprit is Yoshikage Kira, a strikingly handsome office worker eager to keep his carnal passion for women's hands under wraps. But when he crosses paths with the legendary Joestar clan, his perfect world begins to crumble—and he will do anything to get it back. Now Josuke and Jotaro find themselves facing down a diabolical foe

with a devastating Stand. Can they take back Morioh from a seemingly invincible evil? 3-Disc Blu-ray Set, Episodes 21-39, 1080p, 16:9 HD, English & Japanese Stereo Audio, English Subtitles

SPECIAL FEATURES: 104-Page Booklet, Interview with Director Naokatsu Tsuda, English Cast Interviews, Art Gallery, Clean Opening and Ending, Trailers



Pokémon Battle Frontier - The Complete Collection (3 winners)

The territory might be familiar, but even Ash and Brock can find more than a few surprises in their home region of Kanto, like a Pokémon Ranger hot on the cases of two Legendary Pokémon! May's back on the Contest path, blazing a trail to the Kanto Grand Festival, while Ash seeks out the hidden facilities of the Battle Frontier. If finding them wasn't hard enough, he's still got battles with the Frontier Brains to deal with—much tougher than any Gym Leader he's ever

faced. 6-Disc DVD Set, 47 Episodes, 4x3 Video, English Audio

Aksys Games

Horgihugh and Friends - Nintendo Switch (3 winners)

- A horizontal side-scrolling shooter featuring vibrant retro graphics and an adorable cast of animal characters.
- 6 challenging stages, 13 intense boss battles, 2 difficulty levels, and a unique power-up system to explore.
- Take control of two pilots at the same time, since you'll need all the help you can get.
- Featuring artwork by Kou (Mega Man 2X, Shantae) and music by Motoaki Furukawa (Gradius II, Metal Gear, Policenauts).



Bandai Spirits Co., Ltd


GUNDAM UNIVERSE SAZABI (1 winner)

From "Mobile Suit Gundam: Char's Counterattack," the distinctive crimson Sazabi joins Gundam Universe!

[Set Contents] Main body, Beam rifle, Beam Tomahawk, Optional right hand

Stands approximately 6.1" tall

Only product with affixed official Bluefin label has been thoroughly tested for safety and meets all North American consumer product safety regulations and entitles the purchaser to product support assistance



Eleven years ago in 2011, I speculated that the original *Tiger & Bunny* TV series would become a mega-hit in the USA for its fusion of then-contemporary Japanese animation sensibilities with classic American-style super-heroics. That prediction turned out to be untrue. *Tiger & Bunny* arrived just a bit early; its simulcast was not on popular anime streaming service Crunchyroll, but the more general media-focused Hulu as part of Viz Media's now-defunct "Neon Alley" label. Most vitally, no U.S. TV broadcast ever happened. Toonami didn't relaunch until the following year, and by then, Marvel's *The Avengers* redefined global fan expectations for "superhero teams on screen," which was decidedly not *Tiger & Bunny*'s unscripted/reality show combined with "buddy cop" tropes from the 1980s and 1990s. Plans for a live-action Hollywood film adaptation were quietly abandoned. It would be another half decade before *My Hero Academia* would become the "anime version of American super-heroics" megahit in the United States I thought *Tiger & Bunny* would be.

But never underestimate otaku (see sidebar). Thanks to that fan support, one year after the TV series concluded, the half-recap theatrical film *Tiger & Bunny: The Beginning* was released, and then in 2014 came the proper sequel film *Tiger & Bunny: The Rising*, which ended with the implicit message of

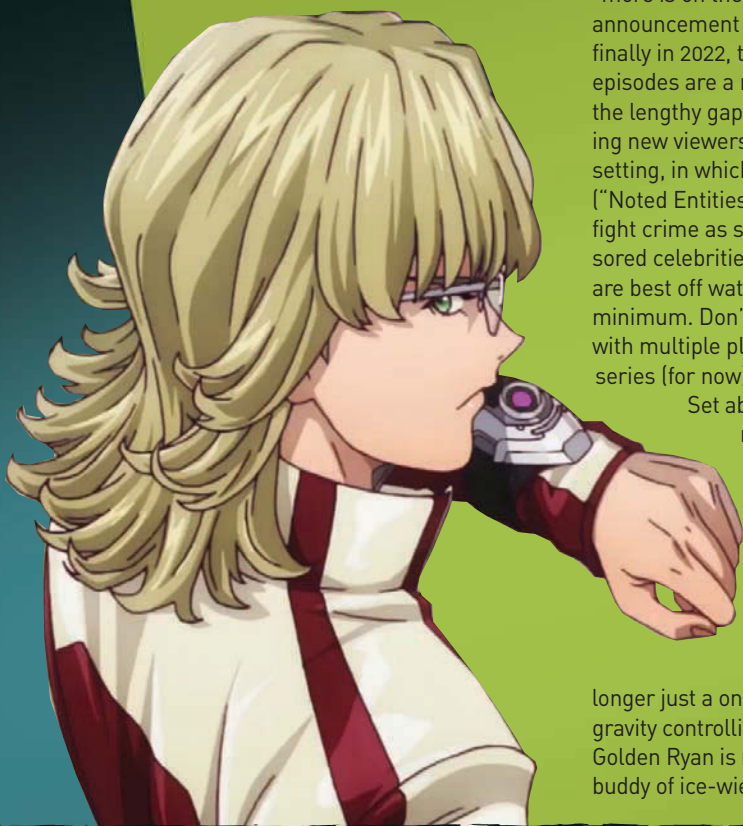
WE CAN BE
HEROES!

©BNP/T&B2 PARTNERS

Will *Tiger & Bunny 2* prove to be “the choice of a new generation”?

By Daryl Surat





"more is on the way." It took until 2019 for the announcement of *Tiger & Bunny 2*, and then finally in 2022, the first 13 of a planned 25 episodes are a reality thanks to Netflix. Despite the lengthy gap, no effort is devoted to introducing new viewers to the premise, characters, or setting, in which superhumans known as NEXT ("Noted Entities with eXtraordinary Talents") fight crime as show business and become sponsored celebrities in the process. New viewers are best off watching both theatrical movies at a minimum. Don't worry, they're all on Netflix, with multiple platforms also carrying the first TV series [for now].

Set about one year after *The Rising*, now EVERYBODY involved with Hero TV is a "buddy duo" pairing, not just middle-aged widower Kotetsu (Wild Tiger) and younger superstar heartthrob hero Barnaby (Bunny), who share the same temporary super-strength/speed "Hundred Power" NEXT ability. No longer just a one-off character for *The Rising*, the gravity controlling jerk (trying to be less of a jerk) Golden Ryan is now a permanent addition as the buddy of ice-wielding bombshell idol Blue Rose.

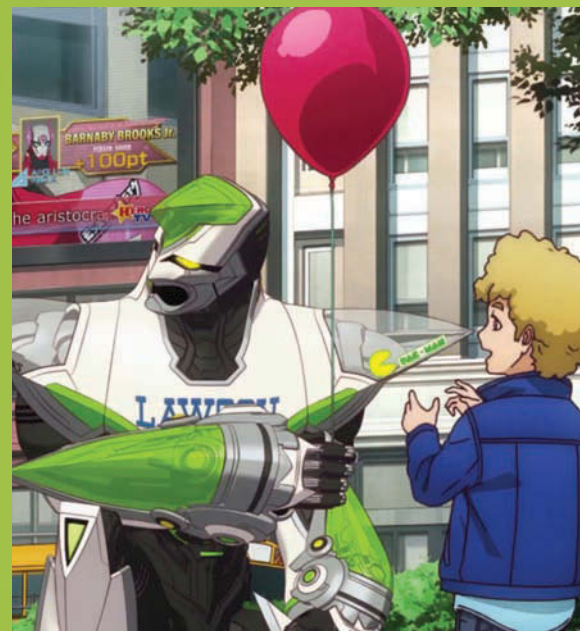
The powerhouse Rock Bison and stealthy Origami Cyclone form a duo of misfits, while the pairing of wind-riding Sky High and pyrokinetic Fire Emblem is downright ingenious. In addition, there are new heroes. Paired with the returning lightning-wielding martial artist Dragon Kid is Magical Cat, a 14-year-old magical girl-style rookie with the ability to conjure water. Then there's the "traditional BL-conductive" teenage duo intended as younger analogues to Kotetsu and Barnaby: 17-year-old dark-haired barrier builder Mister Black is brash and headstrong as he craves the spotlight, while telekinetic He Is Thomas (called just "HIT" by his many admirers) is the cold withdrawn platinum blonde.

There have been some changes since last time. The 3D CG used for the suited-up heroes blends much closer with the otherwise 2D animation, although some of the rapid strike exchanges reminded me of gag fights in the ultra-low budget comedy *gddg Fairies*. The lewder camera angles for Blue Rose are generally omitted, though she does still wear the very revealing outfit. The black nonbinary hero Fire Emblem, despite its campiness, is far less stereotypically "wacky queer character" compared to Series 1; a continual evolution that started in the movies since offense is not the intent. The story beats regarding corporate sponsorship and reality-show celebrity, while still present, are sharply curtailed, though Hero TV and its now heavy-set producer Agnes remains a featured player.

This makes *Tiger & Bunny 2* even less about super heroics than ever before. Yes, the original certainly emphasized a more lighthearted "superheroes as office workers" format, such that professional strife among our two lead "buddies" was purposefully depicted more like "bickering lovers having relationship troubles." But now everybody is in a buddy duo, and while

TORAUSA AND KOTEBANI, OVER AND OUT

Although *Tiger & Bunny* may have faded away in the minds of most American fans upon completion of its simulcast, in Japan the fandom kept going strong. Manga adaptations, drama CDs, portable games, novelizations, stage plays of dubious quality, and merchandise galore from the official channels was made possible due to the groundswell of unofficial otaku support; a significant quantity of which was BL-oriented fan works imagining the predominantly male heroes as being romantically involved with one another. If you were ever curious what ignited more widespread otaku acceptance of "daddies with facial hair" throughout the 2010s, the catalyst was "Wild Tiger" Kotetsu T. Kaburagi; a seismic shift from the typical teenager/young adult anime protagonist!



©BNP/T&B2 PARTNERS



IN THIS SUPERHERO SHOW, NO MAJOR SUPERVILLAIN CONFRONTATIONS OCCUR WITH THE PRIMARY CAST UNTIL 2/3 OF THE WAY THROUGH. ONLY THEN ARE THE PHYSICAL, MENTAL, AND MORAL FORTITUDES OF OUR HEROES TRULY CHALLENGED.



the specifics differ, the overall idea is the SAME THING FOR EIGHT EPISODES: teased dissention among (insert featured duo here) that is quashed by the end of that episode thanks to a combination of questionably effective guidance of Kotetsu and Barnaby plus a minor criminal scuffle for which nobody is seriously hurt. These stories chiefly play out as conversations in the company gym or while sharing meals. Certainly, this provides for several endearing character interactions among both the Japanese and English casts, all of whom reprise their roles with the exceptions of Laura Bailey as Dragon Kid

and Travis Willingham as Rock Bison in the English dub, who have been recast with Cassandra Lee Morris and Aaron LaPlante respectively. For those who kept the faith all these years, that's more than enough.

But it does mean that in this superhero show, no major supervillain confrontations occur with the primary cast until 2/3 of the way through. Only THEN are the physical, mental, and moral fortitudes of our heroes truly challenged. I suppose that aspect remains unchanged from 2011, and had *Tiger & Bunny 2* come out within a few years of the original, this wouldn't be a concern.

But in that substantial interim, the bar has been raised not only by *My Hero Academia* and other anime takes on Western-style superheroes, but also by American films and television series such as DC's *Arrowverse* or Marvel's various TV offerings. Quite frankly, even 2018's *Double Decker! Doug and Kirill*, a significantly less popular spin-off series (which I nevertheless enjoyed quite a bit), surpasses *Tiger & Bunny 2* when it comes to the "buddy cop duo" interplay and shenanigans. In this modern hero-saturated pop culture landscape, *Tiger & Bunny 2* is simply "okay" considering how long we've been waiting for it.


But perhaps hewing so closely to the original carries with it a hope that *Tiger & Bunny 2* will up the ante in quality for its final half, as its predecessor did. After all, this first half ends with some ominous developments for Golden Ryan, He Is Thomas, and Magical Cat, and despite a prominent shot in the opening credits, the villain-murdering vigilante known as Lunatic has yet to resurface even as his law-enforcing alter ego oversees our heroes. I've been wrong about *Tiger & Bunny* before, and there's a very real chance that once Netflix releases the remaining 12 episodes, these plot hooks will be followed up on. Should that happen satisfactorily, I'll be eating my words once again, to which I'll say "thank you ... and again, thank you!" like everybody's favorite wind-manipulating himbo Sky High.

***Tiger & Bunny 2* is available from Netflix.**



**ALTHOUGH TIGER & BUNNY MAY HAVE
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AMERICAN FANS UPON COMPLETION
OF ITS SIMULCAST, IN JAPAN
THE FANDOM KEPT GOING
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THIS NEW SEQUEL SERIES.**






Birdie Wing -Golf Girls' Story-
is an over-the-top anime sure to
thrill even non-sports fans.

By Daryl Surat

THE BEST BY **PAR!**



I have no interest in golf—I hesitate to even acknowledge it as a sport—and yet one of my favorite series this year is *Birdie Wing -Golf Girls' Story-*. It is everything that real golf isn't, namely exciting and outlandish, while simultaneously holding just true enough to the finer technical details of actual golf to satisfy fans of the game.

In a fictional European nation reminiscent of Sicily or France, Eve is a cool but rude (gimme a break) orphan in her early teens who makes ends meet in that oh-so-familiar hard way that is the fate of so many young abandoned girls: by being a high-stakes ILLEGAL HANDICAP GAMBLING GOLFER as part of the SECRET WOMEN'S GOLF UNDER-WORLD run by the WOMEN'S GOLF MAFIA which rules from the shadows. Make no mistake: *Birdie Wing* is maximum "anime golf." Known as the "Rainbow Bullet" for her unmatched ability to just make full-strength direct line shots with uncanny precision regardless of course hazards, Eve mentally destroys her opponents who can't fathom anybody making such an impossible shot, let alone a mid-teen whose wardrobe consists entirely of cut-offs like herself. Unlike Golgo 13, Eve's fee is not \$3 million per hit; it's taking all she's got to keep the dirty cops bribed so that her other young orphan friends needn't return to a life of implied slavery/trafficking. Eve's world-weary attitude changes the moment she finally meets an equally, if not more skilled opponent: the lovely "Innocent Tyrant" Aoi Amawashi, who is everything Eve isn't as far as demeanor and circumstance. Aoi is well-mannered, polite, and as the fabulously wealthy

daughter of two former ace golfers is on the verge of making her own professional debut as she dominates the U15 ("under 15") tournament ever unfazed by the pressures of high-level competition.

So begins a tale of star-crossed love at first sight...um, of one another's golf, of course! What? You never heard of asking someone out (to um, play golf), or been so nervous about the next time you get to see someone (to play golf), or secretly met with someone in a VR chatroom that everybody you know says you shouldn't associate with (to play golf)? The only way for Eve to reunite with Aoi (on the golf course) is to become a respectable professional, but the more unsavory elements of golf want Eve for themselves. For example, the predatorially promiscuous GOLF VAMPIRE SNAKE WOMAN who resembles Eliza from *Tekken 7*. There's enough yuri bait being thrown out to catch a shiver of sharks, for as was often said about last year's *SK8 the Infinity*, "there is no heterosexual explanation for any of this." Such is befitting a series whose theme song is titled "Venus Line"; a refrain that conjures up memories of my youth mishearing the lyrics to girl group Bananarama saying "I'm your Venus!"

But the beauty of *Birdie Wing* (aside from its cast) is how absolutely everything in the world, every high-stake plot escalation, is not only the result of playing outlandish golf but also a lead-up to playing more outlandish golf. This fusion of classic sports shojo *Aim for the Ace!*-style stylings right down to use of Osamu Dezaki-like pastel still frames—"harmony cels" or "postcard memories"





as I prefer to call them now that cels don't exist—with the gangster narrative tropes and *Kakegurui*-like onslaught of crazy gambling chicks would already prove novel...but then top all of that off with the fact that *Birdie Wing* is produced by Bandai Namco Pictures, whose parent company Bandai Namco Filmworks was previously known as Sunrise of *Mobile Suit Gundam* fame, and you get something for which every single aspect is utterly insane in the best possible way. The latter detail in particular allows for some subtle and not-so-subtle homages to mecha anime conventions in general and *Gundam* in particular (see sidebar), and it also explains why Aoi has videogame icon and Namco mascot Pac-Man painted on all of her personalized golf balls.

Although *Birdie Wing* makes no attempt at explaining the rules or terminology of golf, as long as you know what Eve knows—hit a ball with a stick into a hole in the ground using fewer swings (aka strokes) than your opponent—you can follow along. It may help to know that the expected number of strokes for a given course is known as “par” for the course, such that completing a course in one stroke fewer than the expected par is a “birdie” and two strokes fewer is an “eagle,” but this is optional. To visually convey how awesomely that ball got smacked, the golf courses and balls are rendered in 3D CG for extra dramatic zooms and rainbow-colored particle beam effects. At the same time, if you do know the game and the lingo, the strategies employed by the conventionally skilled characters do make sense since golf is a pursuit for which Japanese audiences are familiar with. As such, these world-class players can credibly exhibit world-class feats. Contrast this with any time anime depicts a sport less popular in Japan (say, basketball) where the supposedly legendary players simply carry out rudimentary fundamentals.

Despite never liking sports, I tend to greatly enjoy sports anime. Unfortunately, the genre generally doesn't catch on among American otaku unless it has some sort of high “shipping” element to its characters. *Birdie Wing -Golf Girls' Story-* is certainly abundant in that, though in this modern age sports shows with predominantly male casts are primarily enjoyed by ladies and those with mostly female characters are largely intended to be viewed by guys. With any luck, the outrageous levels of camp on display in *Birdie Wing* will help endear it to fans in the US, because shojo sports anime is rare enough as it is, to say nothing of an anime-original series (that is, not adapted from a manga, game, or novel) such as this one.

***Birdie Wing -Golf Girls' Story-* is available from Crunchyroll.**

GUNPLA GIRLS' STORY

The moment *Birdie Wing* truly endeared itself to me was near the end of episode one, where it's revealed that the precious high-stakes item Eve's caddy friend Lily was set to lose to a middle-aged man wasn't her maidenhood as would befit a true criminal narrative, but rather her Perfect Grade RX-78-2 Gundam model kit with the 30th anniversary extra finish. Then I realized there were various mecha anime callouts strewn throughout the production. To immediately captivate Eve, Aoi produces a 48-inch driver club which is only slightly shorter than she is. In doing so, Aoi brandishes this massive club in the trademark "Masami Obari sword pose" that hero robots have struck for decades. Later, when the secret underground high-tech golf randomizer facility is revealed, it employs a decidedly "transforming mecha"-like sequence in the name of golf course generation.

The product placement of Lily assembling Gundam plastic models ("Gunpla") is an overt indicator that *Birdie Wing* is brought to you by the makers of *Mobile Suit Gundam*. But there are (slightly) more subtle ways, as well. Eve recalls receiving instructions from a stern golf mentor voiced by none other than Shuichi Ikeda, perhaps best known for voicing *Gundam* primary antagonist Char Aznable. Not to be outdone, it's only "logical" that the advisor for Eve's rival Aoi be voiced by Tohru Furuya, who voices the iconic primary protagonist of *Gundam*, Amuro Ray. The name of his character in *Birdie Wing*? "Amuro Reiya." Actually, forget what I said about "subtle."



The beauty of *Birdie Wing* (aside from its cast) is how absolutely everything in the world, every high-stake plot escalation, is not only the result of playing outlandish golf but also a lead-up to playing more outlandish golf.



A Page of Life!

By Michael Goldstein



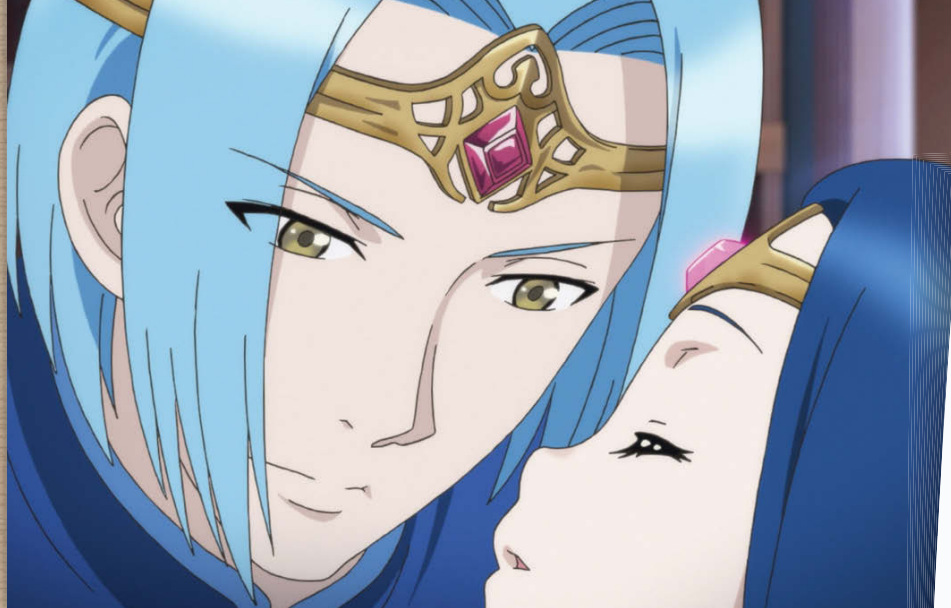


Ascendance of a Bookworm puts a fresh spin on a stale anime genre.

A wise man once said, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Motosu Urano has apparently never heard of this saying. She was supposed to be a college student on the brink of being a librarian, but fate has other ideas in mind. She dies after heavy books crush her body, and though she wishes to be surrounded by nothing but literature in the next life, life is never that simple. She wakes up as Myne, a young sickly girl who lives with her parents and older sister in a medieval-looking town, but no scroll or book in sight. As it turns out, the nobles of her new world, Ehrenfest, have the monopoly on books, and as a result, books as a basic commodity are simply beyond the economic reach of a lower-class commoner family like hers, and the only kind of

writing present where she lives is the prices displayed at the market stalls. What's a poor girl to do? Why, she's gonna make her own books, of course!

The *isekai* reincarnation genre machine has struck again, this time in the form of *Ascendance of a Bookworm*, whose third season premiered during the spring 2022 anime season. (Its first season premiered all the way back in the fall 2019 season.) I know what you're thinking: Oh, man, *another* getting-transported-to-another-world story? Yeah, it's easy to get bummed out by the same old, same old premise season after season. But in a genre populated titan hits like *Konosuba*, *Re:Zero*, *Overlord*, and even *The Rising of the Shield Hero*, *Bookworm* manages to move in a completely different direction from day 1 onward



Our protagonist is not granted any game-breaking powers; in fact, she's not even looking for power in the first place. All she wants is something to read.



and produce a genuinely refreshing take on a bloated genre by doing so. What exactly does this show do that most other shows just don't?

It starts with the show's titular bookworm, Motosu, er, I mean, *Myne*. She's great just by being so different from your average *isekai* protagonist. It's not just her personality—excitable, good-natured, determined—that contributes to the show's vibrant atmosphere, it's the fact that she's starting her journey with probably the worst hand of cards—five years old, living in a poor medieval community, and constantly bedridden due to a mysterious illness—as opposed to any previous *isekai* protagonist that would likely end up being reincarnated into an overpowered badass as if it was the only option available. She's not granted any game-breaking powers; in fact, she's not even looking for power in the first place. All she wants is something to read. And instead of despairing when she can't reach for the books she loves, she just decides to make her own books with knowledge from her previous life as a Japanese woman, even going as far as to make her own paper. And, without getting into any spoiler-y details, she does eventually get those books.

This third season, in particular, wastes no time getting back to business, particularly with Myne getting used to her life as a priestess and brining books to the public by any means necessary. Here, we're picking up right where she was the last time we checked in, coming off two previous seasons (and a couple more OVA episodes). With winter right around the corner, Myne has been requested to stay at the cathedral to avoid a situation in which she needs to come to the church when needed. It's the perfect time continue producing her picture book, something that hasn't gone unnoticed by the Ink Guild setting their sights on her and her advanced method of ink production. And that's just in the first couple of episodes of the season!

It's all part of *Bookworm's* atypical world-building process—well, atypical to traditional *isekai* conventions, anyway, especially as Myne slowly but surely climbs the sociopolitical ladder of her new world. First, there are no Demon Lords to defeat, there are no royals hiding among the peasants, there are no flashy fights or explosions (sorry, Megumin!), there are no terrible armies slaughtering civilians, there's no horniness of any kind (sorry, Darkness!), there are no tagalong lazy goddesses (sorry, Aqua!), and Myne certainly has no chosen-one journey to embark on.

There's also the fact that, given our protagonist's weak constitution, most of the anime's universe is bound to either her home or the town she lives in. Props must be given, though, to how it works around this constraint; it manages to make the most mundane of settings, such as going outside, and turn them into these magical little moments because the show remembers what

restrains it in the first place and what its protagonist has to deal with. In addition, you also have these moments in which Myne integrates into her new family and improves the lives of those around her by using the knowledge from her past life to make such things as shampoo, pancakes, and better-tasting soup. Sure, it falls into that convention of someone introducing better ways of living in a less fortunate society, but it still makes for interesting storytelling because it focuses on what is common rather than what could be considered fantastical, like the telephone.

Don't get the wrong impression; there *is* conflict in this show, which is another thing that *Bookworm* handles with class. Action scenes are as rare as shiny Pokémon; tensions build from the present knowledge that Myne is not only doing everything she can bring books to the wider public, but also the fact that she's doing so on borrowed time. This vulnerability and ability to not rely on more bombastic displays of action and destruction ultimately benefit the show in the long run. When you get down to it, it's rich people against poor people is rich people against poor people, no matter what world you're born in. So maybe *Bookworm* does have a few "Demon Lords" to deal with.

One particular instance of note is Myne and the circumstances of her reincarnation, though this is all the way back in the first season (but it still bears repeating). Let's be frank; possessing the body of a little girl just as she is on the brink of death is going to be a problem for *somebody* at *some point*. There's no denying that it's freaky, even by *isekai* anime standards. Any other show would've just glossed it over with some kind of lame joke, but *Bookworm* puts in the effort and successfully derives some major pathos out of the experience. It's clearly painful for both sides of the conversation, but by the end of it, you're just so happy everyone involved managed to work things out. Plus, this isn't the only conflict *Bookworm* refuses to pull punches on—in this case,

what's exactly been ailing her in the first place—but I think the less I spoil, the better.

It's easy to compare *Bookworm* to the likes of another merchant-centric show, *Spice and Wolf*, given that both shows have an abundance of detail and tend to deal heavily with the economy of their respective worlds. But I'd argue that *Bookworm* has more in common with, of all shows, *Dr. Stone*—that is, reintroducing something from one world to another; it just doesn't have anything close to a *shonen* conventions, not to mention a lack of major conflict.

So, when you put all of this together, *Bookworm* is more like a slice-of-life-type show built around the trappings of an *isekai* anime. No dragons, no mermaids, no demons, no fairies; just family and friends and a young girl's rising in the merchant business. Helping its case is its lovely supporting cast, none of whom seem interested in using Myne's aspirations to their

advantage. Of note especially is Myne's relationship with Lutz, a boy her own age. Though they make a good team, the hints at a plausible romance seem to forget that they are mentally years apart. Whether this will be rectified further down the road has yet to be seen.

Fortunately, we may not have to wait very long to find out. At the time of this writing, *Ascendance of a Bookworm* is currently airing its third season. Its popularity, so far, has been well earned, given how it does away and down-scales many of the standard *isekai* conventions in favor of a more character-driven dramedy. Myne has made a lot of progress over the span of three seasons, and it'll be fascinating to see where she goes next. The future is literally an open book!

***Ascendance of a Bookworm* is available from Crunchyroll.**







Skeleton Knight in Another World is not your standard run-of-the-mill isekai anime.

TO THE BONE!

When you first sit down to *Skeleton Knight in Another World*, it looks eerily like it's going to be *That Isekai* of the season. We're led off with warnings that what we're about to see could disturb some viewers, and thrown directly into two young women in a fantasy world being set upon by men whose intentions are absolutely not good.

But something is different. Maybe it's the choice of camera angle. Maybe it's that things never get as far as we expect them to. Or maybe it's the fact that the disturbing visual in question is one of these ill-intentioned guys getting absolutely destroyed by a skeleton in paladin armor. Because, for everything else it may be, this series is surprisingly uplifting.

From Page to Screen

Like a lot of the current era's big *isekai* hits, *Skeleton Knight in Another World* started its life on the *Shousetsuka ni Narou!* website. Roughly translating to "Let's become a novelist," the site lets its users both read and publish free web novels. At present, more than 2 million people use the site, racking up more than one billion page views per month.

Ennki Hakari's web novel is in relatively esteemed company. *Log Horizon*, *The Irregular at Magic High School*, and *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-* all began on the site, eventually being acquired by light novel publishers and imprints. In the case of *Skeleton Knight in Another World*, it was picked up by Overlap.

The story is running in print as we speak—both as a light novel illustrated by KeG, and in manga form. And, of course, Arc's adventures are in the midst of being fully animated.

Fictional Background

Protagonist Arc has an all-too-familiar back story. He was just a normal guy from our world who happened to have a really high-level character in his

favorite video game. Specifically, he played his way up the skill trees to build a Heavenly Knight (basically a paladin). And under the helmet? A skeleton avatar. He even had a cool character background worked out: despite his divine magic, he's been inflicted with a strange curse, and wanders the world to attempt to lift it.

One day, Arc the player wakes up in the world of the game. He has all his character's powers and more—basically, if he ever used it on his way up the classes, he has access now. Oh, and he's a skeleton.

On the one hand, it's a dream come true for Arc. He's a huge nerd who loves fantasy stuff, and now he can fight battles and meet cool magical people. On the other... he's a skeleton. And he's aware that if he ever takes his helmet off, he'll likely get mistaken for some sort of Undead. So, leaving his helmet on and affecting his in-game persona, he sets out to make the most of his new life. But, as with any *isekai* hero intent on a quiet life, things do not go according to plan.

See, Arc is crazy powerful, and no amount of low-level missions will hide that. He soon finds himself in the company of Ariane, an elf on a mission to free her people from unscrupulous, treaty-breaking nobles. He also finds a friend in Ponta, a *kitsune*-like animal spirit. What he doesn't immediately realize is that, between his wielding of holy magic and his affinity with Ponta, he's proven himself to be anything but an undead monster... and so, he finds himself on the very real version of his fictional character's quest.

Anything But Monstrous

Arc's desires in this new world are pretty benign. He wants to have a cool fantasy time: eating good food, fighting monsters, and wielding magic. He wants to meet elves *because* they're elves... because that's

By Kara Dennison



legit fantasy stuff. And he wants to help people, because he's just like that.

To that end, much of what goes on in the show follows that brief. A job protecting a little girl as she picks herbs turns into an epic one-on-one battle. A journey to Ariane's home village includes a pleasant evening fishing for food and snuggling Ponta. But this world still has a gruesome underbelly: one where elves are considered lesser by many humans, while the ones who *do* defend them often only do so for political gain.



Nor is there any shortage of terrible people who would do terrible things to other people. But it's interesting to note, as mentioned before, the framing. When two young women are attacked, it's shown as being unpleasant. Camera angles are often low and looking up, placing us at an eye level with the victim rather than the villain. It is very clear whose side we're on, and that no one intends for us to enjoy what's being done.

The opposite, in fact—the show also takes plenty of time to show us what happens to these perpetrators. It's extremely rare for them to make it out of their respective episode alive.

In a way, *Skeleton Knight in Another World* is a lot like its hero. At first glance, there's a fear that this shiny fantasy series might be just as unpleasant under the hood as some that have come before. But given a moment, we see that that's just on the surface. The show, like Arc, is here for fun and fantasy. And if there is any nastiness afoot, it will be dispatched quickly. And just as nastily.

You'll definitely see a lot of familiar *isekai* earmarks on *Skeleton Knight in Another World*. A gamer ending up in a world shockingly like his favorite game. Cheat-level powers tempered with a monkey's paw. But there's also a surprising amount of silliness, heart, and unapologetic geeking out over fantasy. Arc is a good boy, and he's just trying to make everyone's day—including his and ours—a little nicer.

***Skeleton Knight in Another World* is available from Crunchyroll.**

MASKED HEROES

Skeleton Knight in Another World comes to us from Studio Kai, a relatively new studio founded in 2019. So far it's brought us the second season of *Umamusume: Pretty Derby*, *Super Cub*, and *Shine Post*. But it's also the source of one of the year's most hotly anticipated series: *Fuuto PI*, the anime adaptation of the official *Kamen Rider W* manga sequel. Looks like Arc isn't the only helmeted hero to hail from the studio.



ANIMES GOT TALENT

The show's hard-rocking opening theme comes to us courtesy of Norwegian singer PelleK. Prior to the series's premiere, he made a name for himself on YouTube by recording heavy metal covers and medleys of popular anime themes. Now, he's living the dream, providing Arc with an appropriately intense anthem.



© Emaki Hakan, OVERLAP / Skeleton Knight Project

IN A WAY, SKELETON KNIGHT IN ANOTHER WORLD IS A LOT LIKE ITS HERO. AT FIRST GLANCE, THERE'S A FEAR THAT THIS SHINY FANTASY SERIES MIGHT BE JUST AS UNPLEASANT UNDER THE HOOD AS SOME THAT HAVE COME BEFORE. BUT GIVEN A MOMENT, WE SEE THAT THAT'S JUST ON THE SURFACE.

Invasion of the Mechanical Violator

Space bounty hunters, Neptune men, and rebel guerillas

Zeiram (30th Anniversary Edition)

An inspired and underappreciated gem, *Zeiram* is one of the finest tokusatsu (Japanese SFX) works of the 1990s. Creatively directed by the



DISTRIBUTOR
Media Blasters

ORIGINALLY RELEASED
1991

RUNNING TIME
97 minutes

genius aesthetician Keita Amemiya, it boasts solid production values on a limited budget alongside impressive practical FX and atmosphere throughout.

Amemiya brings his unique design sense to

the table, blurring the line between the tokusatsu, manga/anime and jidai-geki realms. *Zeiram* is breathless, high-octane action entertainment from beginning-to-end. With *Zeiram*, Amemiya shows himself as a creative force to be reckoned with.

Bioengineered alien-killing machine Zeiram (Mizuho Yoshida) has escaped confinement. Bounty huntress Iria (Yuko Moriyama) and her computer sidekick Bob accept the assignment to track her down to a planet called Earth and capture or destroy her. In Tokyo, Kamiya (Yuki-jiro Hotaru) and Teppei (Kunihiro Ida) are bumbling employees of an electric company. After being tipped off that someone is stealing electricity, Kamiya and Teppei discover Iria's base as the culprit. Kamiya accidentally transports Teppei into an interdimensional "Zone" created to entrap Zeiram just as the creature arrives on Earth. Kamiya confronts Iria and is also accidentally transported into the Zone. Iria's transporter is soon damaged during battle, leaving Teppei and Kamiya stranded in the Zone with Zeiram.

A triple-threat as director, designer and illustrator, Keita

Amemiya (1959-) is a unique talent whose distinct aesthetic combines tokusatsu, futuristic cyberpunk, manga and traditional jidai-geki stylings. After cutting his teeth on the direct-to-video *Cyber Ninja* (1988), Amemiya was eager to make another film. When plans for a sequel to *Cyber Ninja* fell through, Amemiya conceived of a film entitled *HP9999*, where a bounty hunter



pursues an alien criminal to Earth. Amemiya first created the concept when imagining someone in an Edo-era sedge hat walking around in a modern Japanese city which he found unsettling but also visually enticing. Originally, the bounty hunter was to be male and played by Kunihiro Ida, who had worked with Amemiya on *Cyber Ninja*. The producer wanted a female character, however, to give the film more sex appeal so thus Iria was created, played by the gorgeous Yuko Moriyama, who got bruises from wearing the armor. Moriyama's Iria is a likable heroine that feels like an anime warrior heroine



brought to life with just a hint of Ellen Ripley or Sarah Connor.

Amemiya started shooting *Zeiram* immediately after wrapping his work on the first two episodes of the Super Sentai series *Jetman* (1991-92). Made on a limited budget, *Zeiram* was a grueling and difficult shoot, lensed mainly at night and on location. One filming session ran for 37 hours straight. This reliance on location shooting made weather a huge problem. A highly atmospheric film, many images in *Zeiram* are shrouded in an atmospheric mist. Smoke machines using petroleum-based mineral oil were used to create this look. This often enraged local residents as the evaporated oil kept drenching their hung-out-to-

dry clothing.

One of the best live-action Japanese genre films of the 1990s, *Zeiram* features breathless action sequences, exciting fight choreography, arresting art direction and dazzling practical effects. The film is directed very creatively by Keita Amemiya, the costumes are quite inventive and the computer graphics and now semi-retro futuristic monitor displays are appealingly early '90s. Much of the puppeteering for Zeiram's "main unit" was done with old-school tokusatsu industry wire work. Later scenes feature Jim Danforth-style stop motion animation and grotesque Rob Bottin-like puppetry reminiscent of his work on *The Thing* (1982). Unsurprisingly, numerous members of Amemiya's crew for *Zeiram*

would go on to join the equally talented Shinji Higuchi's FX unit for *Gamera: Guardian of the Universe* (1995). This included cinematographer Hiroshi Kidokoro, art director Toshio Miike, VFX supervisor Hajime Matsumoto and FX engineer Izumi Negishi.

Though lost on viewers, the monster Zeiram was intended to be female. According to Amemiya, the feminine quality of her main unit "face" is supposed to be a dead give-away. The alien creature herself is an impression creation. Designed by Amemiya and art director Akihiko Iguchi, best known for creating Toho's Mechagodzilla in 1974, Zeiram combines motifs reminiscent of artists like H.R. Giger and Yoshitaka Amano. Hulking for a tokusatsu creature, Zeiram was played by Mizuho Yoshida, who at one point was almost hit by a motorbike during an aborted stunt when a shock rope snapped prematurely. Yoshida would go on to portray numerous kaiju in the coming years including Legion in *Gamera 2: Advent of Legion* (1996), Dagahra in *Rebirth of Mothra II* (1997) and a similarly hulking vision of Godzilla in *Godzilla, Mothra and King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack* (2001).

In the end, *Zeiram* is a major highlight of 1990s Japanese special effects cinema and something of a minor directorial masterpiece from Amemiya. Amemiya was keen on creating several sequels, a goal he would largely fulfill. A six episode anime OVA was released in 1994 entitled *Iria: Zeiram the Animation*. Something of a prequel directed by Tetsuro Amino (*Macross 7*), it details Iria in his early years as a bounty hunter and her first encounter with Zeiram. A proper sequel directed by Amemiya, *Zeiram 2*, followed shortly after in 1994, reuniting Moriyama and actors Yukiji Hotaru and Kunihiro Ida. Additionally, Amemiya's film *Moon Over Tao* (1997), was first conceived as a Zeiram spin-off set in feudal Japan.

—J.L. Carrozza



DISTRIBUTOR
Media Blasters

ORIGINALLY RELEASED
1995

RUNNING TIME
51 minutes (theatrical),
77 minutes (director's cut)

Hakaider (Hyper Destroyer Edition)

Mechanical Violator Hakaider is an edgy and stylistic reboot of Shotaro Ishinomori's *Kikaider* franchise as only Keita Amemiya could make it. The film takes *Kikaider*'s arch nemesis Hakaider and turns him into an Eastwood's "Man With No Name"-style anti-hero.

Hakaider (his human form played by Yuji Kishimoto) arrives in the dystopian and both aptly and ironically named "Jesustown," run by the androgynous, Hitleresque Gurjev (Yasuaki Honda) who uses the armored android Michael (voiced by anime seiyuu Kazuhiko Inoue) as his

brutal enforcer. After a battle with Gurjev and Michael's security forces, Hakaider is captured by a group of rebel guerillas at war with the government. Micheal and the security forces next attack the rebels' hide-out and seemingly kill Hakaider. Hakaider, however, is not so dead after all.

Hakaider was first introduced in the 1972 program *Android Kikaider*, created by tokusatsu genre godfather Shotaro Ishinomori on the heels of his successful *Kamen Rider* and *Transforming Ninja Arashi*. Hakaider, similarly to *Kamen Rider*'s Hayato Ichimonji/*Kamen Rider #2*, was another android created by the villains. Unlike Ichimonji, who joins hero Takeshi Hongo/*Kamen Rider #1* in his battle against the psychopathic fascist organization Shocker, Hakaider stays evil and becomes hero *Kikaider*'s biggest adversary. Hakaider proved as popular as the hero and even got his own song. The character was given an even bigger role in the 1973 follow-up program *Kikaider 01*. A fan of the character was a young Keita Amemiya. After rising to become one of tokusatsu TV and cinema's greatest modern luminaries with his impressive work on films like *Zeiram* (1991) and the 1994 *Kamen Rider* reboot film *Kamen Rider J*, Amemiya was allowed to direct his own take on Hakaider. This was a decision Toei would wind up regretting.

Mechanical Violator Hakaider is not Keita Amemiya's masterpiece but is top-tier high octane tokusatsu action cinema loaded with visually stunning images. As with Amemiya's penchant for cyberpunk aesthetic, these dazzling visuals feel like they blend live-action and anime stylings. Hakaider's transformation from human-to-robot evokes *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*. Most striking is an arresting dream sequence involving guerilla girl Kaoru (Mai Hoshō) that looks like a Yoshitaka Amano illustration brought to life. A motorcycle chase resembles the early moments of Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* via a Toei Metal Hero show, its choreography was courtesy of the pros at the Japan Action Club.

Hakaider especially comes alive, however, with its impressive finale featuring the title character raiding Gurjev's headquarters, stood in for by the Tokyo University of Technology (also used in *Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla II*). The picture's final act is a visually stunning tour-de-force that is Amemiya at the top of his form.



The brutal, knock-out-drag-down duel between Hakaider and Michael is a memorable highlight and one of Amemiya's best sequences. As with the *Zeiram* films, there is a very creative and effective use of stop motion animation. With tokusatsu industry veteran Akihiko Iguchi as art director, the suits for Hakaider and Michael were created by another veteran, Nori Maezawa, and his Rainbow Modeling.

Toei themselves would wind up fairly enraged by *Mechanical Violator Hakaider* and as a result, Amemiya has been kept away from their properties since. After the failure of his sci-fi jidai-geki *Moon Over Tao* (1997) and his TV miniseries *Tekkouki Mikazuki* (2000), Amemiya has indeed mostly focused on his *Garo*



franchise. *Mechanical Violator Hakaider* would notably be the final production the legendary Shotaro Ishinomori himself directly worked on. Amemiya's director's cut of *Mechanical Violator Hakaider* runs a whopping 26 minutes longer than the under-an-hour theatrical version shown at the Toei Super Hero Fair, a short-lived, live-action successor to their Manga Festival. Much of this additional footage was shot after production had wrapped. Both versions have their merits, with the theatrical edit recommended only because the director's cut is not presented in high definition on Media Blasters' recent Blu-ray.

—J.L. Carrozza

Invasion of the Neptune Men

Released by Toei's brief "Shin Toei" division in July of 1961, the



DISTRIBUTOR
Dark Sky Films

ORIGINALLY RELEASED
1961

RUNNING TIME
75 Minutes

same month as Toho's *Mothra*, *Iron Sharp* is better known in English by its American TV title *Invasion of the Neptune Men*. Directed by the newly-promoted Koji Ota, the film largely came out of the popularity of Toei's previous forays into the early tokusatsu superhero genre. The film is similar in style and tone to their previous *Moonlight Mask* films and particularly their two-part *Planet Prince* films, released in the U.S. as *Prince of Space*. Considered a turkey stateside due to its appearance on *Mystery Science Theater 3000* where it received a particularly biting commentary, *Invasion of the Neptune Men*, especially in its Japanese version, is one of the better non-Toho tokusatsu genre films released in this period. Particularly strong are its memorable sequences of destruction at its end, handled by rising FX wiz-

ard Nobuo Yajima.

Evil alien space pirates in metallic suits from Neptune are attacking Earth. All that stands in their way is the mysterious superhero Iron Sharp (an early role for Shinichi "Sonny" Chiba, fresh from the popular TV series *Messenger of Allah*) who is able to continuously repel them. Soon the Neptunians decide to mount an aggressive invasion of Earth and begin laying waste to Japan's cities with their spacecraft. Iron Sharp, however, is not far behind.

FX director Nobuo Yajima (1928-2019) is one of the greatest unsung heroes in tokusatsu cinema and television, being as responsible for the FX workflow and aesthetic style of the still-active Super Sentai franchise as Eiji Tsuburaya was to the Godzilla series. Yajima had been enraptured by John Ford's *The Hurricane* (1937) as a child. After the war, he dropped out of chemistry school to join Shochiku. There he eventually became an assistant to the head of their FX division Keiji Kawakami, a former wartime cameraman of Eiji Tsuburaya. He moved to Toei once Shochiku's FX department began cutting staff and was for a time the head of their FX division. He had just cut his teeth on the nuclear apoc-



alypse flick *World War III Breaks Out* (1960, aka *The Final War*) and brings a similar sense of doomsday splendor to *Neptune Men*'s finale.

These 20 minutes where the eponymous Neptune Men reduce Tokyo to rubble and splinter are among the most impressive FX work yet produced in Japan outside of Eiji Tsuburaya's unit at Toho. Particularly splendid in its original widescreen format, it's weakened only by stock shots from *World War III Breaks Out*, but those are used in a non-conspicuous way. Per Toei's grindhouse-like penchant for grittier, more violent fare than Toho, this sequence has a more apocalyptic feel show-



ing human reaction and casualty than similar sequences in Tsuburaya's alien invasion films *The Mysterians* (1957) and *Battle in Outer Space* (1959). A particularly beautiful shot from Yajima shows the Neptunian mothership blasting apart model buildings as it flies over them. A peculiar shot to Western eyes that the *MST3K* called snarky attention to shows a building with a display of Adolf Hitler being blown to smithereens. This was actually depicting a display for a movie theater screening a then-popular *Mein Kampf* documentary. The alien and mechanical designs in *Invasion of the Neptune Men* were created by an uncredited Toru Narita, best known for designing numerous creatures in *Ultraman* along with the titular monsters in *The War of the Gargantuas* (1966). Narita often worked for Yajima's unit at Toei without credit as he worked for Toho, known for their strict contractual policies where their employees could not take work at other studios. FX director Yajima would go on to found the Tokusatsu Research Institute which created special effects sequences for a variety of clients, shows and movies such as *Water Cyborg* (1966), *Captain Ultra* (1967), *Spectreman* (1971-72), *Mirrorman* (1971-72), *Jumborg Ace* (1973), *Ultraman Leo* (1974-75), *Message From Space* (1978) and *Legend of the Eight Samurai* (1983).

Along with an edited compilation of the *Planet Prince* films, *Invasion of the Neptune Men* was released directly to American television by Walter Manley and given a particularly awful dub where the kids all sound like adult women talking in falsetto that wound up riffed on *Mystery Science Theater 3000* in 1997. To make Yajima's symphony of destruction even more visceral, shots of WWII-era bombing runs were cut into the film. The Japanese version, if you can find it, is far more recommended and actually one of the more entertaining tokusatsu films of the early 1960s.

—J.L. Carrozza is the author of the *Japanese Special Effects Cinema: Godfathers of Tokusatsu* book series

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Kirby and the Forgotten Land

Talk about a mouthful!



PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
HAL Laboratory

SYSTEM(S)
Switch

RATING
E

For a series that has been a side-scroller—with the exception of spinoffs like *Kirby's Dream Course* and *Kirby Air Ride*—for the majority of its life, one might be tempted to worry when the Pink Puff decides to go full 3D for his next

floating, and sucking up all kinds of enemy powers like you never missed a beat in the transition from one dimension to the next.

I'll admit I was actually a little skeptical myself about how well Kirby would work in 3D, but it really is a seamless transition. *Forgotten Land* forgoes the usual formula in favor of a more *Mario Odyssey*-like

certain amount of friends before you can take on the boss of each world, but that's not the only purpose of the Waddle Dees. The more you find, the more facilities and

sive signs. It may sound impossible, but HAL has somehow made *being stairs* fun. That's right, you too can find out just how exciting it is to turn Kirby into a gape-mouthed

glider as he coasts down a canyon. Marvel as our ball-like buddy swallows an entire dang vending machine and fires off cans like so much artillery.

If the core game isn't enough for you, further tests await in bonus levels that offer up power-centric obstacle courses. One will have you racing across floating blocks



big adventure. This is HAL Laboratory we're talking about, though, and at their worst they still manage to make even the weirdest of *Kirby* games interesting. With *Kirby and the Forgotten Land*, though, they didn't just succeed in bringing Kirby into the third dimension in style, they knocked it way out of the park in the process.

Kirby and the Forgotten Land has as simple of a setup as one would expect from a whimsical platformer that's been kicking around for 30 years. One day, Kirby is minding his own business strolling through his idyllic world, and the next he finds himself whisked away to a post-apocalyptic landscape in need of some serious Waddle Dee rescuing. Before you know it you're running,

adventure composed of various hub levels with a handful of increasingly complex challenges within. The levels themselves might not give you much trouble until later in the game, if at all, but if you're a completionist you're going to have your work cut out for you here.

Every stage has a set number of Waddle Dees you can rescue, and you'll be able to do so in a variety of ways. Some of the specific challenges are hidden at first; you may need to find certain items or destroy a few objects scattered around the stage, for instance. There are also hidden Waddle Dee cages you can find, and getting everything in every stage in your first run is easier said than done.

You'll need to have rescued a

items you'll have access to in the main town. It starts with a power-up shop that unlocks the ability to upgrade powers, and expands from there. You'll even unlock fun mini-games like a tiered challenge that puts Kirby in a fast food worker apron and tasks him with serving up the right orders during increasingly brutal lunch rushes.

One of the most exciting new additions is Mouthful Mode, which sounds like a menu option but is just a fun part of the main adventure. Kirby can now suck in some colossal objects in certain situations, from cars to stairs and mas-

to smash pegs with your sledgehammer, while another will send you across deadly spikes with your tornado ability. These are great ways to get familiar with the various functions of the game's many power-ups, and getting the reward for the fastest time in each one is seriously tough.

From its outstanding visual design to the genuine charm that Kirby always brings to the table, *Kirby and the Forgotten Land* is one of the best times I've had on my Switch in quite a while. And that's the most impressive feat of all.

—Joseph Luster



Elden Ring

Rise, ye Tarnished!



PUBLISHER

FromSoftware

DEVELOPER

Bandai Namco

Entertainment

SYSTEM(S)

PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series, PC

RATING

M

It's common knowledge that *Souls* games are some of the most difficult titles in the world of gaming. The newest entry in the series, *Elden Ring*, is proud to continue that tradition. Though, despite being a new IP for FromSoftware, there's something comforting and familiar about the way it presents itself, especially for those who put their time in with the *Souls* series. This time, however, *Elden Ring* is like play-

ing a more polished, perfected version of a classic formula that feels like what FromSoftware and creator Hidetaka Miyazaki envisioned from the very beginning. In short, it's excellent. And it may very well be the best game of its kind—no exaggeration.

Elden Ring is the product of *Game of Thrones* creator George R.R. Martin and Miyazaki, working as a team. As such, it presents a fantastical narrative that's leagues ahead of everything else on the market, even the previous *Souls* games. But the game has been approached as if it were a refinement of everything that came before it. Its visuals, mechanics, character design, and everything else have been polished in a way that so many sequels wish for, and that's what makes this entry such an astounding accomplishment.

You take on the role of a being known as a Tarnished, who's tasked with bringing peace to an area called The Lands Between. The offspring of a former monarch fight over pieces of the now-shattered Elden Ring, which has been strewn across the land. The Tarnished are without Grace, a type of energy that they use to propel them forward. As one of these unfortunate souls, you must work your way to becoming the Elden Lord, who may reforge the Elden Ring and bring balance to the world once more—that is, if you choose to.

The multiple endings and extensive in-game



lore mean there are many other additional paths for you to choose. That's one of the greatest parts of the game, the fact that there's so much story to take in and mull over, even when there's nothing happening. The narrative at play here is something spectacular, and you'll want to soak up every single bit of it. That's exactly why, even when some of the enemy or boss encounters in *Elden Ring* make you feel like you're pursuing an impossible task, you're able to push through and keep going. You truly do want to see what's going to happen next.

But the game won't hold your hand. It will force you to traverse a massive, sprawling world and will never tell you exactly where to go next, how to get there, or what to do when you finally arrive. Sure, an NPC might give you the name of a location or a general area in which to move, but most of the fun is heading that way and seeing exactly what you uncover.

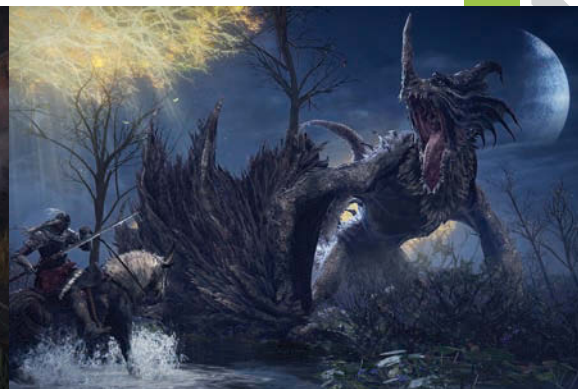
Perhaps you'll find a woman eating "grapes" that aren't really what she thinks they are. Maybe you'll happen upon a massive dragon that can kill you in an instant. You never truly know

what's out there, and that's part of *Elden Ring*'s brilliance. Your ignorance means there's more to experience, especially since you can explore the whole of the game as you see fit. If you see a landmark you want to travel to, you can do so. Just don't expect the game to walk you over there and outfit you with everything you need.

In fact, much of your time is spent trying to figure out how to get to certain destinations. You can use your Spectral Steed, the nimble horse assigned to you, to reach some areas. The rest is really up to you. And in between that, you've got to, of course, kill a bunch of enemies. And boy, do they want to kill you. In fact, for half of these encounters, you won't be able to face them at first. You might even want to turn tail and run, because there's no way you can slay some of the abominations that await you at first blush. But it's that rush of accomplishment, that satisfaction, that pervades when you do happen to come back and conquer, that *Elden Ring* is all about. It's a feeling you start to crave, in fact.

Combine a massive amount of enemies and areas to explore with plenty of NPCs to interact with and you have yourself a recipe for one of the best games of 2022. That's not even counting the gorgeous environments, the minute detailing put into every single facet of the game, and the sheer scope of content there is to explore. *Elden Ring* is huge, beautiful, challenging, and a monument to everything that makes gaming enjoyable for many. Whether you're already a fan of everything the *Souls* games have to offer or you're curious about where the franchise is headed next, *Elden Ring* is sure to satisfy in essentially every way.

—Brittany Vincent



ANNO: Mutationem

A mashup of inspirations



PUBLISHER
Lightning Games

DEVELOPER
ThinkingStars

SYSTEM(S)
PC, PS4, PS5

RATING
T

Imagine all the media we grew up with that tries to predict a distant futuristic society: flying cars, cyberpunk aesthetics, advanced AI, and the lingering question of humanity's very survival. Jam pack that image into a game and you have *ANNO: Mutationem*.

There's a lot more than that, but you get the idea.

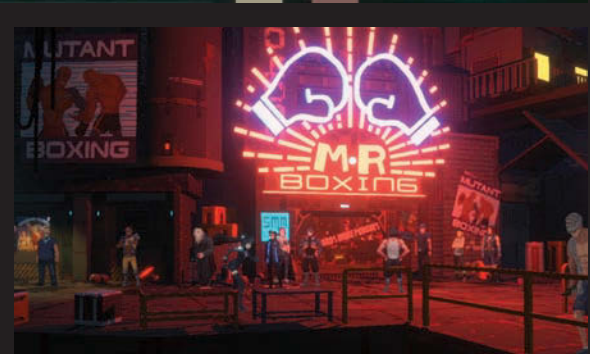
Supported by Sony's Interactive Entertainment China Hero Project (*F.I.S.T.: Forged in*

Shadow Torch, *In Nightmare*), the latest game to make its way from Beijing, *ANNO: Mutationem* is an action-adventure RPG that boasts an exciting immersive world. You play as Ann Flores, an overall badass, who is searching for her missing brother Ryan, but what seems to be an easy task thrusts you into a world with many complexities and an often confusing plot. It feels a bit like an anime where the protagonist is a super powerful weapon or the product of an experiment, leading them to question their livelihood and unearth corrupt government secrets. Remind you of something? With very clear references to popular cyberpunk anime such as *Bladerunner*, *Neon Genesis*



Evangelion, and a smidge of *Akira*, *ANNO: Mutationem* is a mashup of its inspirations with a neon "2D-meets-3D" world.

In this dystopian future, the lines of humanity are blurred. From on-the-fringe underground societies to android soldiers and experimental mutant creatures, you lead Ann to face them all in a mission much larger than herself. The game blends a 3D overworld with dungeons that are much like old-school platformers. Fighting ene-



mies requires a combo of dodge rolling, slashing a few times, repeat. Don't let that fool you, as there are many insufferable bosses who may take a few times to defeat. Leaving grinding behind, Ann's skill tree equips her with better stats and new offensive and defensive moves, but be advised this can only take you so far

Chrono Cross: The Radical Dreamers Edition

Re-release of PS classic



PUBLISHER
Square Enix

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

SYSTEM(S)
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

RATING
T

Chrono Cross is one of the best games the original PlayStation had to offer. As such, Square Enix saw fit to reintroduce it to a brand new generation with *Chrono Cross: The Radical Dreamers Edition*. The idea? Slather a fresh coat of paint on an already excellent JRPG, then serve it up for gamers around the world, including areas in which the game was never initially released outside of

North America and Japan. It seems like a no-brainer, but somehow, it's taken this long for a re-release. Unfortunately, it's hardly the one this game deserved.

For the uninitiated, *Chrono Cross* is a spiritual sequel from the PlayStation era with connections to *Chrono Trigger*. It follows an extensive



cast of 45 different party members but focuses on protagonist Serge, a 17-year-old who finds himself in an alternate world where he actually died a decade earlier. With the assistance of a skilled thief named Kid, he sets off to find the mythical Frozen Flame as the pair travel down a larger, epic quest to save the world. But there's far more to it than that—the game eventually drops some major bombs that connect it to



Chrono Trigger after weaving a heartbreakingly beautiful tale you won't soon forget.

While *Chrono Trigger* is typically held in high regard across the gaming community, *Chrono Cross* is quite the divisive installment, though many (myself included) are of the mindset that it's an underrated classic. So to see Square Enix bringing this game to a wider audience—complete with the Satellaview exclusive *Radical*



against OP enemies. You'll want to stock up on health replenishing items as dungeons are lengthy and there can be multiple bosses you encounter.

The game is split into two distinct "modes," and whether that's for better or worse depends on how you look at it. The majority of your playthrough will consist of platforming, but the areas where you can freely explore and complete side quests shine above the rest of the 20ish hour game. I found enjoyment in running through neon cities, helping out at the family bar, and discovering short side quests, like revealing the identity of an idol or ring fighting for free corn juice.

Where the game falls short is the story's direction. What would be a cool concept is muddled by a large cast of unmemorable characters and some vague plot points that often lean heavily on its inspirations. That being said, it's a

good game if you are keen on cyberpunk RPGs and open to new iterations of the genre.

While the storyline is spotty, *ANNO: Mutationem*'s best asset is its art style and cityscape. This is the most beautiful pixelated title I've seen to date. Colors are super saturated and at



times realistically dull. Even the way the lighting works with the pixel art is phenomenal. *ANNO* doesn't stop there. The developers understand the importance of immersive elements. Everything from characters' expressions, especially Ayane's, Ann's hacker friend, professional voice acting, and a synthwave soundtrack that successfully enhances the gameplay and never bores elevate the overall gameplay experience.

For ThinkingStars' first game, they did a pretty bang-up job, especially with the immersive world and pixelated art style. Although the first version needed tweaking, the team has been very open to player feedback, saying that "after more than a month of struggle, we have improved the game's experience." I would like to see them up the ante in their future titles or even an *ANNO: Mutationem 2* (which seems very likely due to the open-ended endings).

—Brianna Fox-Priest

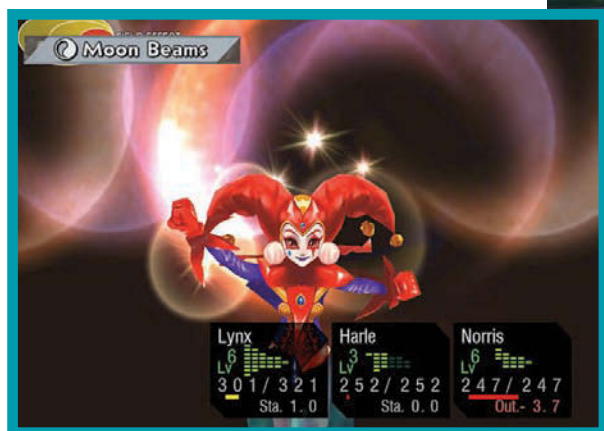
Dreamers—was a welcome surprise. It's the first time this text-only adventure has ever had an official translation, and acts as something of a connective story between *Chrono Trigger* and *Chrono Cross* to fill in the blanks on the events you may have missed out on. However, aside from the fact that *Chrono Cross* is a great game all its own and this package comes with *Radical Dreamers*, there's really no saving grace for what ultimately is a lazy remaster.

It's true that Square Enix saw fit to add new textures and models as well as new character portraits to *Chrono Cross*, but the graphics just aren't up to par with what you can get with your own work with AI upscaling at home. It's sad to say, but fanmade remastered imagery trumps what's available in this version, especially when it comes to the pre-rendered backgrounds. For an official developer with the means and monetary requirements to make a quality product, this kind of effort is more than a little disappointing.

Fortunately, the gameplay remains unchanged. This is still an

excellent game that incorporates original elements that we don't typically see in most RPGs, and to great effect. Not only are there plenty of characters to recruit, but dozens of hours of gameplay, strategic battles to clash in, and an exciting storyline that anyone can enjoy, even those who missed out on *Chrono Trigger*.

On one hand, this isn't a remaster that I can recommend wholeheartedly.



It is, however, the easiest way to access *Chrono Cross* at this time for a new audience. So if you do decide to pick it up, don't expect a lovingly applied fresh coat of paint. It's a functional game that does look marginally better, but it's just not up to par with what you'd expect from a large company. Still, if you haven't played *Chrono Cross*, you should at the very least give it a runthrough.

—Brittany Vincent

The House of the Dead: Remake

Zombie Nation



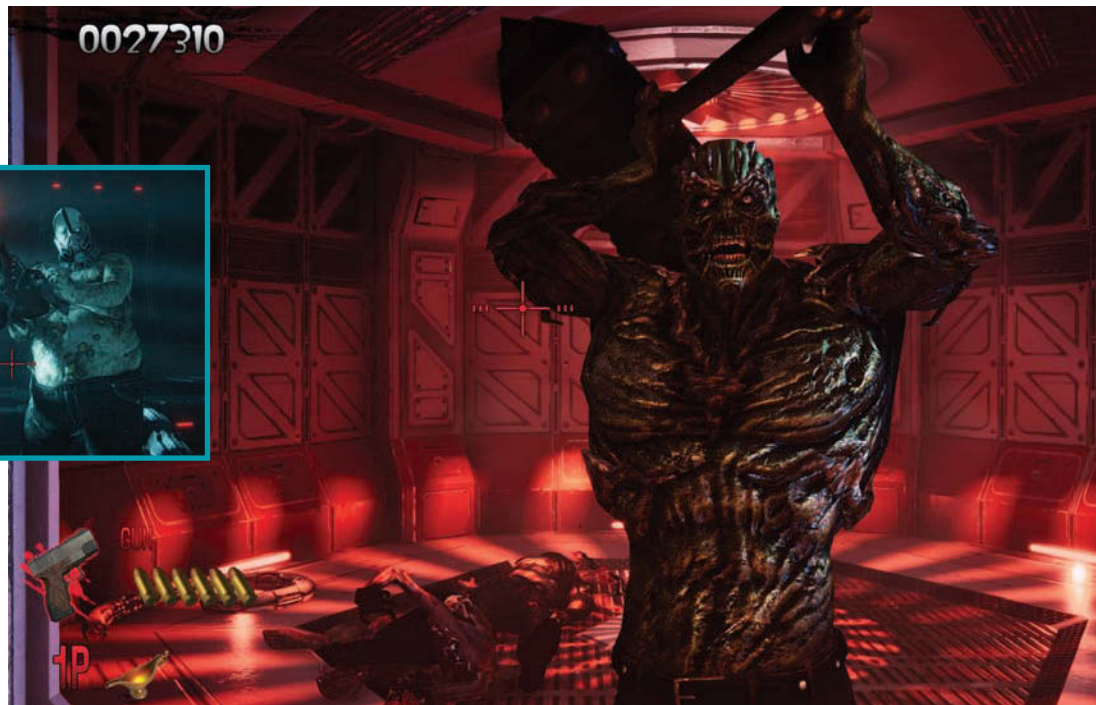
PUBLISHER
Forever Entertainment
S. A.

DEVELOPER
MegaPixel Studio S. A.

SYSTEM(S)
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

RATING
M

The *House of the Dead: Remake* is an update of one of the most famous rail shooters of all time. Ever since it hit arcades nearly 30 years ago, it's been a mainstay of every dimly-lit collection of video game cabinets from malls to free-standing arcades. Sega's zombie shooter has also been seen everywhere from the Sega Saturn to PC, and now it's finally hit modern consoles as well, even including the Nintendo Switch.



It's never been a masterpiece by any means, but it's an iconic franchise with a legacy that follows it wherever it goes. Now, developer MegaPixel Studio and Sega have tackled a remaster to bring the classic to life once more, though like many of the other remastered titles

Triangle Strategy

More engaging than the title



PUBLISHER
Square Enix

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

SYSTEM(S)
Switch

RATING
T

When Square Enix and co-developer Artdink first revealed *Triangle Strategy*, it was listed as having a tentative title that felt exactly like a placeholder. Then more and more trailers were released, and that very straightforward title remained. THEN it was on store shelves, which is when we were totally, one hundred percent

sure this fun and engaging throw-back strategy-RPG would be known as *Triangle Strategy* until the end of time. Maybe the name isn't all that inspiring, but the final product is a noteworthy return to a time when a proud few Japanese-developed games ruled the strategy roost on home consoles.

If you find yourself getting *Final Fantasy Tactics* vibes when gazing upon the self-described

"HD-2D" glory of *Triangle Strategy*, you've just about nailed its vibe already. With Tomoya Asano—who previously produced games like

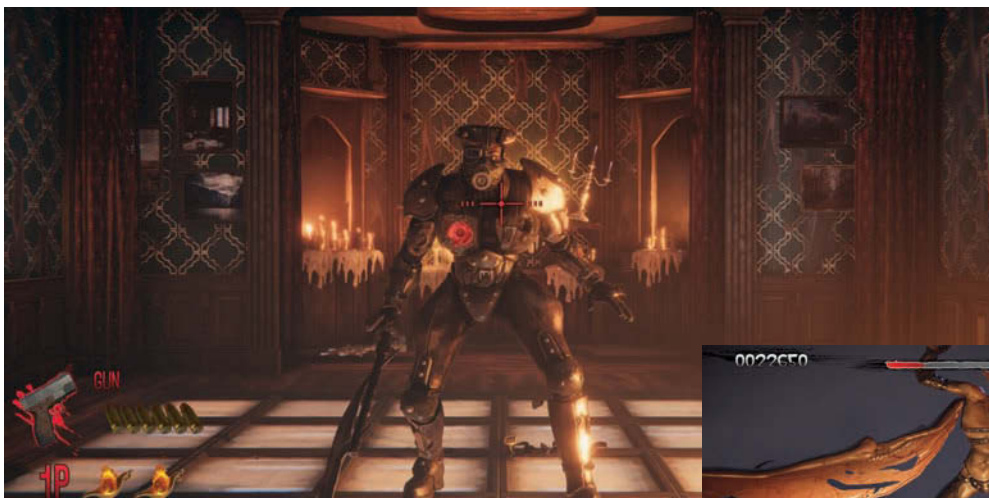


Bravely Default and *Octopath Traveler*, the latter of which shares a similarly distinct aesthetic—leading development, you know you're in for a deep adventure with a mature story that meshes well with its tactical nature.

The battle system at the heart of *Triangle*



Strategy is simple at a glance but opens itself up to some complex and rewarding strategies. One of the main components you'll need to consider during each turn is the ever-increasing amount of TP (tactical points), which is what you use to power your special skills and abilities. Even in the most precarious of scenarios, it may be beneficial to avoid making any major moves during a turn just so you can build up the amount of TP necessary to deal a decisive blow. Or you could just blow it all as you build it up and stretch the scenario into a more drawn-out, demanding and difficult battle. The choice is yours, and thankfully—depending on who you ask, at least—there's no per-



as of late, it's hardly indicative of the effort one should be able to expect from a big-name video game developer. The result? A playable but somewhat disappointing version of a game that's never been that polished to start with.

With the stage set, you'll be tasked with entering spooky houses, large expanses, and a variety of environments with one goal in mind: killing zombies. You don't have to move around on your own, either. All you have to do is be ready at a moment's notice to just shoot everything that moves, sans civilians of course, and go from there. It can be repetitive, sure. You really need

to be in the mood for this type of game, and it's almost always played best in an

arcade where you can pretend to actually wield a gun and laugh it up with your buddies in the middle of a bunch of other games.

You can choose a few different routes during each run, pick up power-ups, and fight off bosses, but ultimately this is a one or two-hour romp that you just play to feel like you're a

badass. You can do this offline with a friend in two-player co-op, but unfortunately there is no online option. You can choose, however, whether to play cooperatively or competitively. That's something, at least. And that's the basic game setup, which you're likely familiar with if you've ever set foot in an arcade.

But in terms of being a remake, this *House of the Dead* isn't really that great-looking, nor does it do much to bring it into the modern era. I noticed issues with frame rate all over the place,

lengthy loading times, and slowdown when multiple zombies were onscreen. It's not the type of performance I'd expect from a freshly updated remaster, and in fact it doesn't feel much like a "new" game in that department.

If you're a faithful fan of the *House of the Dead* franchise or you just want an excuse to jump back into

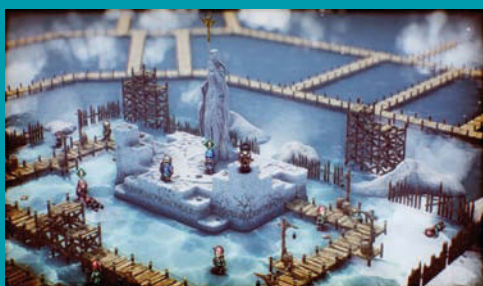
the games after some time, this remake is worth spending a night or two with. Otherwise, you can go ahead and skip it and just spend a few quarters going through some of the games at your local Round1 or Dave and Buster's. It's a much better experience in person, anyway.

—Brittany Vincent



madeath to make you sweat over the possibility of those decisions leading to the eternal loss of a beloved unit.

Add in the myriad systems you'll be learning over the course of the campaign and you have a battle system that really begs you to be bold. It's not something you might try on the normal diffi-



culty level of, say, a *Fire Emblem* game, but it's always worth it to eke out a victory by any means necessary here. As you surmount each challenge, you'll be treated to a rich narrative that spares nothing in the way of details. If anything, *Triangle Strategy* can come off as a little long-winded at times, and more impatient players just wanting to roll from one

battle to the next might find their eyes glazing over at the reams of dialogue on screen.

Triangle Strategy is more than just a simple throwback to the strategy-RPGs that dominated systems like the original PlayStation in the late '90s. It's an enthralling entry in a genre that frankly doesn't get enough love on modern consoles, and fills in some gaps in the Nintendo Switch's already robust library. If you have even a passing interest in tactical gaming and value story just as much as the gameplay that paves the way between scenarios, you'll want to add this one to your collection.

—Joseph Luster

Be Our Guest!

Hello fellow Otaku! So, you've been cosplaying for a while now, creating cosplays and getting your cosplays out there via social media. For some cosplayers, their next step may be working closer with conventions as something more than just an attendee. Whether this is by volunteering or panel hosting, here's some advice on putting your best foot forward and building that relationship with conventions.

Volunteering is a great way to get involved with a convention and can even net you a free pass; but the responsibilities of volunteering at a convention may not give you much time to cosplay. Another way to get involved with a convention is to offer your services as a panel host. As a panel host, you would be creating and running a panel for the convention that can either run for 30 minutes or 60 minutes. It's recommended to have a longer and a shorter version of your panel prepared, since panel time limits can vary by convention.

What the panel will cover is up to you to decide but lean on your cosplay strengths. If you plan on teaching, make sure it's a topic you are very familiar with so you can answer any potential questions audience members may have. Also, think of a panel that's unique and specialized for better odds of getting accepted. Conventions get plenty of submissions for general Cosplay 101 type panels leading to many cosplayers vying for one panel spot. Instead, think of a panel that you haven't seen at a convention before, something that will set you apart.

Now that you have an idea of what panel you would like to run, it's time to plan it all out. Create an outline that pinpoints all the important things you will be teaching or discussing. Visuals and handouts can also keep attendees interested during your panel. Some conventions will be able to provide you with a projector for showing off slideshows but be prepared with some printed out informational handouts in case the panel room doesn't have A/V capabilities.

Having other panelists with you on your panel can help keep the conversation going as well as add additional perspectives and ideas. Running the panel, there may be times when you have to lead your panelists by directing questions specifically towards them to give them something to talk about or moderating your panelists if one person inadvertently takes over a question, not allowing others to chime in. As the host, you are in charge of the pacing of your panel and your panelists, and don't forget to add time for audience questions.

Once you have your panel summary and outline written up, look on convention websites for who to contact or how to submit panels. If this is your first panel, start with smaller conventions to help you build confidence and perfect your panel, while also building up a resume of experience to include the next time you submit a panel to a convention. Write up a professional email giving an idea of who you are, your background and expertise and what you plan on presenting. Just like a resume, keep it succinct and informative. Attach your panel summary and outline before sending off the message.

Then it's just a matter of practicing your panel and waiting to hear back.

Ani-Mia links

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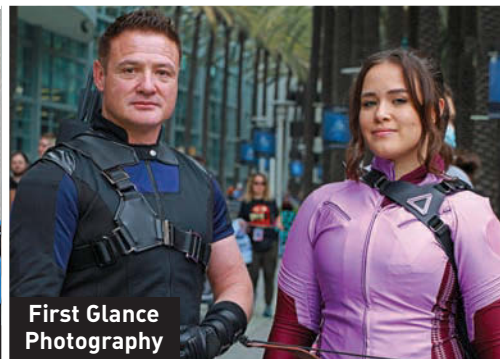
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VIZ

Anime Food Venues We Wish We Could Visit in Real Life

Neat to heat treats that would be fun to eat!

Anime food is just beautiful. It's really not fair. There are some great videos out there reproducing tasty anime treats. But the dream is to get to the real place. Short of collab cafés, sadly, we won't have that chance.

If we did have our way, though, these are a few places we'd like to drop in on. In the interest of fairness, we do note that there are slight down sides to each. So, in the end, maybe it's for the best that we'll never get the chance to have a meal in any of these spots...



Western Restaurant Nekoya

Restaurant to Another World blends two of our favorite things: isekai and anime food. Headed up by a skilled chef and tended by the adorable Aletta and Kuro, Nekoya serves up tasty fare six days a week in Tokyo. On the seventh day, they're closed... as far as our world knows. In actuality, Saturdays are devoted to serving dragons, fairies, and other fantasy-world denizens. The staff cooks up traditional real-world delights that please the palates of even the most paranormal of patrons. The down side? If you're a fantasy entity, you can only enjoy Nekoya once a week. And if you're a human, you will invariably find yourself craving Master's cooking on a Saturday, when they're "closed."



The Spirit World

You don't need a dragon boy to tell you the #1 rule about visiting a world of immortal creatures and eating their food. (The rule, in case you've somehow missed it, is "Do not.") We can't fully fault Chihiro's parents for chowing down on the theme park grub in *Spirited Away*, though. Studio Ghibli consistently draws some of the most beautiful anime food we've ever seen, and this film is no exception. They did kind of miss every sign that something supernatural was afoot... but look at that Cornish hen her mom is going to town on.



Chihiro's parents got away lucky, by virtue of... well... Chihiro. Unless you have a plucky child willing to take a job and sign away their name to free you from your own divine punishment, maybe give this one a miss. Then again, those crab legs...

Oishiina Town

Need more anime food? How about an entire

city of it? *Delicious Party Pretty Cure* take place in Oishiina Town: a city devoted to restaurants, cafés, and eateries of all kinds. Our heroines hail from families in each of its three sectors. Yui's family's diner resides in Japanese Food Street. Kokone's family owns a fine dining establishment in Western Food Street. And foodstagrammer Ran slings ramen with her



family in Chinese Food Street.

Sadly, Oishiina Town is going through it right now. The phantom thieves known as Bundoru are kidnapping the adorable fairies who make food taste good, putting local eateries at risk. (That's a lot to digest, but it's pretty standard for a *Pretty Cure* series.) Your best bet? Do like Ran-Ran and grab your order to go.



BLEACH

THOUSAND-YEAR BLOOD WAR

**COMING
OCTOBER 2022**

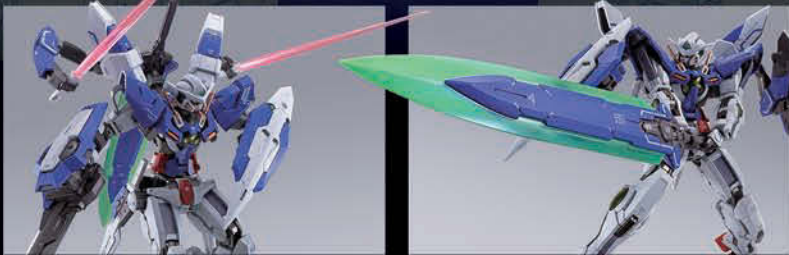
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Finally, the secret "missing link" of the GN Drive,
the "Double Drive" technology, can be revealed...



METAL BUILD
GUNDAM DEVISE EXIA
OCTOBER 2022



The Gundam Devise Exia as seen in "Mobile Suit Gundam 00 Revealed Chronicle!"

STORY: Setsuna F. Seiei ended the war in Azadistan through disarmament. But to Celestial Being, this intervention is an aberration that cannot be allowed to stand, and secretly begins plans to launch a counter insurgency. Thanks to the newly devised Double Drive technology, the Gundams will only grow stronger.

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